



Smarter investment can help ease looming education crisis

Shifting demographics, poverty pose challenges

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There is an education crisis in our country that is reaching dangerous levels. Growing poverty, attacks on the integrity of public education, an uncertain future direction of federal education policy and entrenched racial educational disparities guarantee that the next big crisis will be in education. Consider the following:

- Poverty rates for children are scarily high. According to the Children’s Defense Fund, in 2012, about 1 in

5 children in the U.S. was poor, and approximately 1 in 3 children of color was poor. More than one-third of children of color under the age of 2 were poor, years during which the brain is rapidly developing. The emergence of what is being called a “recession generation” — those impacted by the Great Recession — means that about 25% of children who suffer from recession-induced poverty are expected to spend at least half of their remaining childhood in poverty.

- During his presidential campaign in 2016, President **Donald Trump** vowed to strip down federal involvement in education, including the possibility of dismantling the U.S. Department of Education.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that in 2014, the average four-year public high school graduation rate for all students was 82%. However, the four-year graduation rate for white students was 87%, compared to 76% for Hispanic students and 73% for African-American students.
- NCES statistics in 2009 and 2011 revealed that black and Hispanic students trailed their white peers by an average of more than 20 points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in math and reading in the fourth and eighth grades; this amounts to a difference of about two grade levels. These gaps persisted despite the No Child Left

Behind Act, the goal of which was to narrow achievement gaps through standardized assessments of student progress and even though Hispanic and black children’s reading and math performance improved.

As this crisis deepens, it is becoming more apparent that the fundamental question about our education system today is one of investment: Are we brave enough to invest in success, or will we continue to invest in failure and jeopardize the lives of millions of children? This is a question of priorities. For example, according to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, state spending on corrections increased by 141% between 1986 and 2013. During this same period, the increase in spending on K-12 education was horrifyingly smaller, 69%.

Acknowledging the world we live in

The demographics of America are shifting. Rather than something to be feared, growing diversity can be a great thing if we embrace it as such. In fact, we’ve always been changing — demographically, socially, culturally and in many other ways. The problem isn’t demographics shifting; the problem is that many of our social systems today do not distribute opportunity to all groups equally. Many of these systems were built on foundations of racial discrimination. The groups that will make up the majority of our population in the near future are those groups that



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

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have been most marginalized, and that's problematic.

Since half of babies born today are nonwhite, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, we will be a nation of "majority-minority" people by the 2050s. Yet, we cannot think of these changes as decades away; today's infants will be entering prekindergarten in a mere three years.

In 2012, 13 states and Washington, D.C., had an under-5 age population that was majority-minority, up from five states in 2000. There is great cause for alarm that our education systems, especially in communities of color, are not prepared. Worse, it can be argued that we are creating new systems of marginalization, for example, through the snowballing costs of tuition, rampant student debt and attacks on affirmative action in higher education.

Demographic shifts and educational restructurings are on a collision course at a time when, globally, higher education is at a premium. If we continue to allow our education systems to fail children

of color, the consequences will not be experienced by them alone. When we consider the increasing global value of higher education, it becomes clear that nothing short of our future national health is at stake.

Our schools are one of the best ways to prepare children for the increasingly diverse country in which they will play, grow, learn and work. Several years of research support the conclusion that interracial contact through schools not only improves intergroup relations and reduces racial prejudices, but also improves critical thinking skills and academic achievement for all students. In a global economy, these skills will be increasingly sought and rewarded.

More than in-school factors matter

Racialized educational disparities suggest a mismatch between our educational services provided in schools and the children they are serving. This could include both exclusion and devaluation of cultural resources and opportunities. Implicit bias that manifests itself as low expectations of

teachers and culturally invalidating classrooms decreases self-esteem and students' beliefs in their ability to learn. As sociologist Dr. **Pedro Noguera** notes, numerous studies document how achievement stereotypes, such as the belief that white students perform generally better than other students, can make those other students susceptible to teachers' underestimations of their abilities, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, educational disparities do not arise solely from what goes on in the classroom, although many arguments today for reform or privatization would lead one to believe that to be true. Research consistently notes that teachers account for approximately 20% of student achievement. No one would argue that teacher quality and accountability are not important. However, far greater contributors to success are socioeconomic factors, accounting for approximately 60%.

High-poverty schools have to devote far more time and resources to family and health crises; security; children who



come to school not speaking standard English; students who need special resources; and many children with very weak educational preparation. In this context, although teacher quality and accountability are important, the structures and support systems that surround children as they grow and learn are equally, if not more so, crucial. A study by Harvard University sociologist Dr. **Robert Sampson** found that by the third grade, the educational impact of living in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood is equivalent to having missed an entire year of school.

Unstable environments facilitate poor outcomes

To thrive, children need strong relationships with caring adults and a stable environment, which includes consistent access to food and shelter. But poverty is a powerful, destabilizing force. It can have significantly detrimental impacts on nearly all aspects of a child's life. Hunger, family instability, risks of homelessness and chaotic neighborhoods all can seriously undermine a child's chance for success later in life.

Research has shown that stability in schools and the home plays an important role in academic achievement. Studies find that students who frequently change

schools or residences perform worse academically than their peers, particularly if they undergo multiple moves.

In Chicago, a study of sixth-graders over a six-year period found that students who had moved four or more times experienced what amounted to a one-year educational gap compared to their peers who had not moved. Again, we can see the continued effects of the Great Recession on children: 73% more public schoolchildren in the U.S. were homeless in 2012 compared to 2007, a total of nearly 1.2 million children.

Food insecurity and hunger also affect a child's ability to learn. Research shows that going hungry makes kids sick, and sick kids miss more school. When they do make it to class, hungry kids have a harder time focusing and may be more irritable or experience fatigue more than other children. Even mild to moderate undernourishment can limit children's ability to grasp basic skills. Hunger and food insecurity, above and beyond poverty, have significant and negative impacts on children's educational performance.

Finally, one of the most underappreciated destabilizing forces — toxic stress — must also be accounted

for if we are to see improvements in educational outcomes, especially for poor children of color. Stress acts as a toxin to child development.

Neighborhoods in distress produce a host of stressors that can profoundly impair social and skills growth; physiological and psychological health; and the capacity to learn and thrive, according to Dr. **Martha J. Farah**, founding director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Neuroscience and Society. Children growing up in very poor families with low social status can experience unhealthy levels of stress hormones, which impair neural development.

Childhood environments operate in systemic and reciprocal ways. For example, environmental conditions such as inadequate housing or failing schools, can limit choices; limited choices can create stress; stress can impair health and functioning; impaired functioning can inhibit opportunities to find employment or thrive in school; lack of work or a sound educational footing can limit access to healthful environments, and on and on.

These environments also impact the functioning of primary relationships in children's lives, in healthy or unhealthy ways. A study from the National Poverty Center found that family economic conditions seem to impact children because they affect the material and social resources available to children *and* family psychological processes, such as parental emotional well-being and parenting styles. This means that our earliest experiences in life literally shape our brains.

According to Dr. **Bruce D. Perry**, a clinician and researcher in children's mental health and the neurosciences, 80% of the brain is organized and developed in the first four years of life. Positive, predictable experiences aid that development, while consistently stress-producing or destabilizing experiences impair it. One study found an almost 9% reduction in the size of the hippocampus



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— through which memory and emotions are controlled — in children suffering the effects of childhood trauma.

Invest as if all children matter

Stability begets stability. The trajectory of kids’ paths isn’t likely to change if the environments in which they live don’t change. What that means for communities is a less educated work force, further deteriorated communities and a greater reliance on social services and emergency care, all of which will have substantial impacts on city budgets. We are investing enormous amounts of money but just not in the right things.

Thanks to groundbreaking new research, we now have a more nuanced understanding of the complex, long-term relationship between educational success and environment: It is not just the structural resources children have access to that are important, but also the quality and consistency of relationships and degrees of stress that children experience. Unfortunately, our policy and program responses often fail to align with what neuroscience tells us can improve not just educational outcomes but also life outcomes.

We invest too little in children during their early years when their cognitive and noncognitive abilities are the most

malleable. Gaps in noncognitive abilities between advantaged and disadvantaged children appear early in their lives. Children are heavily influenced by the environments in which they grow up and the relationships they experience from birth — those things that neuroscience tells us are important for healthy child development. These early investments are especially important for children from disadvantaged communities who navigate stressful environments or lack strong attachments to caregivers able to serve as buffers against the stressors of such environments.

At a deeper level, the growing crisis in education calls into question how we, as a society, view community and our children as members of a community. We all have a stake in how children are faring and whether we are providing every child the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. Our concern must extend equally to children in the shrinking city of Detroit, the isolated hills of Appalachia or the rural, invisible communities of California’s Central Valley, just as it does for children in the wealthy suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Policymakers must slow the impulse to close schools or decrease funding to address their budget issues. For example, one report shows that 31 states spent less

per pupil in 2014 than in 2008, before the Great Recession, or implemented additional teacher accountability measures that neither definitively measure student achievement nor take into account the outsized role out-of-school factors play in poor performance.

Research has begun to demonstrate how the structures and emotional experiences of childhood mold cognitive development and impact success in childhood and beyond. Promoting child well-being, therefore, requires attention to the system of conditions and relationships in children’s lives. Our public schools provide a unique confluence of these conditions and relationships. We must regard them as the invaluable assets that they are, or can be, in children’s lives. ■

About the author: Jillian Olinger serves as a public policy and planning analyst and Opportunity Communities Program manager at Ohio State University’s Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. The institute works to connect individuals and communities with opportunities they need to thrive by educating the public, building the capacity of allied social justice organizations and investing in efforts that support equity and inclusion. For more information, visit kirwaninstitute.osu.edu.



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