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Educational Equality in the Future: Risks and Opportunity

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Acknowledgments

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CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

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Ashley Jochim

Ally and Stacy are typical American high school seniors. Ally leaves her Advanced Placement American government class feeling excited after a stimulating debate over the merits of free speech. After school, she attends her student government club and then meets with her tutor, who is helping her prepare for the SAT. That evening, after completing the work associated with an online college course that she enrolled in, Ally and her parents discuss plans for summer, which include an internship with a local business and a two-week camp for aspiring leaders. She's looking forward to graduation and feels good about where she's headed after consulting with her private college advisor, who helped the family wade through the many options.

Stacy is not so lucky. She leaves her remedial math class feeling bored and defeated—hardly surprising after spending the last 30 minutes working through an online module meant to catch her up. She doesn't have anywhere to go after school, so she heads to the local park with friends. Summer's just around the corner, but she's not looking forward to it. If she doesn't pass her math class, she'll have to go to summer school, otherwise known as "purgatory" to the students who attend. She's worried about what she's going to do after graduation, but the school's guidance counselor is only available once a week and it's impossible to get an appointment.

Ally's and Stacy's stories are typical. They play out all over the United States every day, sometimes even in the same school, and reveal a lot about the growth in educational inequality over the last half century. One student enjoys challenging coursework in school, a wealth of enrichment opportunities outside of school, and a support system, including college-educated parents, that helps her prepare for post-secondary opportunities. The other languishes with disengaging coursework designed to fill academic gaps that emerged years earlier, a dearth of enrichment opportunities, and limited access to guidance or other resources that might allow her to improve her situation—much less pursue a post-secondary education that would allow her to maximize her potential.

For much of American history, public education has been cherished as the engine of upward mobility even as it struggled to deliver on the promise of equal opportunity. While progress has been made, opportunities for public education to bridge the gaps between students and families of different circumstances remain severely compromised and may be getting worse.

Addressing all of the sources of educational inequality illustrated by students like Ally and Stacy will require a broader perspective, widening the lens beyond an exclusive focus on the historical issues of funding, segregation, and the achievement gap. This essay considers the changes in American education that are upending traditional notions of equity in education and offers ideas on how policymakers could act to address this issue in the future.

New Challenges to Equity in Education

Expanding access to educational opportunity has defined debates over school reform for nearly a century, including desegregation efforts, finance equalization cases, and proposals to expand school choice. Despite notable progress in some areas, opportunity is more stratified than ever along the lines of race and class.

While the issues of racial and income-based segregation, inadequate spending, and gaps in achievement continue to define educational inequality, they fail to capture broader societal shifts that are changing the ways we think about youth development. These include increased household spending on out-of-school learning experiences, particularly among wealthy families; the growing complexity of post-secondary educational opportunities; and the importance of nonachievement-based educational outcomes. These shifts highlight sources of educational inequality that, to date, policy has largely failed to address—and at times actively undermined—and suggest new ways for improving opportunity for America's most vulnerable children.

The growth in out-of-school learning experiences

Two decades of school reform have sought to address educational inequality by "fixing" schools. And yet, students increasingly don't rely on traditional K–12 schools to prepare them for success in life. Wealthy families are investing growing amounts of time and money into the education of their children, a phenomenon Garey and Valerie Ramey deem "the rug rat race."[1] While all families spend more time with their children than in decades past, college-educated parents have made pronounced investments in providing enriching out-of-school experiences for their children. According to a 2015 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, children of wealthy parents are substantially more likely to have participated in sports, done volunteer work, taken music, dance, or art lessons, and participated in religious instruction or youth groups.[2] Just 7 percent of low-income children attend summer camp, compared to nearly 40 percent of high-income children. The gap between wealthy and poor families' expenditures on enrichment activities more than doubled between the 1970s and the mid-2000s.[3]

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These challenges don't just mean fewer "fun" experiences for low-income children. Out-of-school experiences offer important ways for students to develop academic skills like critical thinking and problem solving, as well as social-emotional skills such as persistence and teamwork. These experiences may be especially important for low-income students and students of color, who are less likely to have access to teachers and curricula that develop these skills in school.

The lack of enrichment compounds the disadvantages these students face as it relates to access to other resources that support readiness to learn. Too many students enter the classroom with challenges that cannot be resolved by schools alone, including exposure to trauma and unaddressed basic health care needs. To date, policymakers and educators have sought to address these challenges by investing in wraparound services, which offer a continuum of care within the walls of the school. But such models have proven expensive to deliver and difficult to coordinate, and leave little room for families to customize supports to address their unique needs.

While most considerations of inequality in education focus on low-income students and students of color, students with disabilities also have been profoundly affected by the growth of out-of-school learning experiences. Consider, for example, the search for afterschool programs and summer camps for a student with autism. The private organizations that offer such programs are even less equipped than public schools to make accommodations for students with a disability. The most advantaged parents can rely on their social networks and wallets to secure a meaningful set of experiences for their children. But low-income students and students of color are disproportionately represented among students with disabilities, and are less likely to have access to the resources that would enable them to tap into those experiences.

The Growing Complexity of Postsecondary Educational Opportunities

For decades, success for students exiting high school was clearly defined—admittance to a four-year college. Charter management organizations like KIPP were founded on the premise that K–12 schools can and should be preparing disadvantaged students for a traditional four-year degree. Yet today, in the face of a growing skills gap, weaknesses in the American high school experience, and escalating higher education costs, policymakers are increasingly turning toward a broader array of postsecondary pathways. Such reforms come in various flavors— career and technical education, vocational education, apprenticeships and internships, and dual enrollment programs—but share the goal of enabling more students to find success after high school and become prepared to join the workforce. But if these ideas are to benefit students historically disadvantaged by circumstance, policymakers must provide students with the guidance and support required to navigate their many options and position all students to access the highest-reward pathways.

Career and technical education (CTE) has a troubled history in the United States. As Jim Stone, director of the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, reports, "The early vocational education was driven by a philosophy of fitting people to their probable destinies. Kids from poor families were tracked off into becoming worker bees. Others were tracked off to go to universities and be the intelligentsia. We would today call that tracking."[4]

Today's postsecondary pathways are more likely to be driven by student demand and increasingly involve training in higher-reward career paths like medicine and advanced manufacturing, rather than low-reward career paths like auto mechanics and food service. But we know from families' experiences choosing schools in "high choice" cities that informational barriers to access and success loom large, especially for the most disadvantaged families.[5]

Evidence suggests that the field is poorly positioned to support students to make the most of expanded postsecondary pathways. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds already struggle to navigate a complex college admissions process with little support. The American School Counselor Association suggests high school counselors should have a caseload of no more than 250 students—a stunningly high number considering the types of support many disadvantaged students require to successfully navigate postsecondary options.[6] (At KIPP's Newark Collegiate Academy, one counselor serves just 75 students.) Yet, in many states, the actual ratio of counselors to students is two or three times as large as the recommended caseload. Students from affluent families can of course address these gaps by paying for private services—at a cost of $12,000 or more for the "base package," as a recent Atlantic writer noted.[7] This is to say nothing of the myriad advice, contacts, and experience many affluent, college-educated parents already bring to the table and the financial support they can offer in the form of private tutoring and SAT preparation courses to bolster their children's success in the admission process.

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The shifts in the postsecondary education landscape arrive at a time when the high school-to-career continuum faces major equity challenges. We already know that low-income students, students of color, and students with special education needs often enter high school lacking the academic and social-emotional skills to succeed in an educational environment that offers heightened autonomy and expectations. Then there's the fact that these same students are less likely to attend schools that will prepare them for college and careers. Together, these forces may conspire to steer disadvantaged students into academic pathways that limit their postsecondary education opportunities.

While much of the attention to inequity in postsecondary education has focused on college preparation and access, less advantaged students are also less prepared to join the workforce. Paradoxically, students aged 13 to 17 from low-income families are half as likely to hold a part-time job as their higher-income peers. While many observers agree that expanded access to apprenticeship and internship programs can provide disadvantaged students valuable work and educational experiences, increasing such offerings has been stymied by the expense and lack of funding to support apprenticeship programs. This is particularly the case with programs that allow disadvantaged students to balance the demands of work, school, and life, and to overcome logistical barriers— such as transportation—that may limit their ability to take advantage of on-the-job learning opportunities.

The growing importance of nonachievement-based educational outcomes

There is broad recognition that in an economy driven by technological innovation and a complex social landscape, schools can no longer count on traditional academic preparation to set students up for success later in life. The types of skills that will enable students to succeed in the 21st century are distinct from those routinely emphasized in K–12 education. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) implicitly recognizes this shift with its requirement that assessment of a nonacademic measure of student success be part of state accountability systems.

Although definitions can be difficult to nail down, observers increasingly recognize that education must strive to develop student skill sets that extend beyond traditional academic expectations. For example, in the modern economy students must be able to apply their knowledge through critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and effective written and verbal communication. Additionally, to succeed in a changing world, students must possess the "soft skills" that enable them to persist, engage in challenging problems, and collaborate with their peers. A substantial and growing body of literature links such outcomes with healthy child development.[8]

The shift away from "achievement only" assessments could be especially beneficial to historically disadvantaged students, who have often borne the brunt of policymakers' and bureaucrats' relentless focus on test scores. Low-income students and students of color are more likely to attend schools defined as low-performing under conventional achievement tests and, as a result, more likely to face the unintended consequences of these assessments, such as a narrowing of the curriculum and an increased focus on test preparation. A shift toward broader assessments could counteract these trends and support more enriched learning environments for historically disadvantaged students.

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However, a shift away from achievement-based assessments could also muddy the waters by allowing more students to fall through the cracks. Key challenges include the lack of evidence around how best to support the development of soft skills or reliable and valid ways of measuring them. As a result, school- and nonschool-based providers that seek to develop these skills lack methods for assessing their results or addressing gaps in student learning.

In schools that have sought to embrace broader notions of student success, teachers have struggled to establish high academic expectations while also offering authentic learning environments that support the development of nontraditional educational outcomes. While no student is well-served by learning experiences that fail to support the development of skills that extend beyond traditional academic expectations, the implications loom largest for students who have historically struggled in traditional K–12 environments. As Jal Mehta observes, 21st century learning environments offer these students new ways to make school engaging and relevant. Moreover and as described above, these students are also less likely to have access to the out-of-school learning experiences that support the development of nontraditional academic and nonacademic competencies and more likely to enter school with skills gaps that make navigating these learning experiences challenging. Yet few schools have a record of success in supporting students to develop 21st century learning competencies.

Addressing These Challenges Will Require a New Approach

To date, policymakers, researchers, and advocates concerned with educational inequality have focused their reform efforts on two equally intractable sets of reform ideas. One set of ideas has focused on addressing students' access to high-quality schools as defined by traditional achievement tests. This includes efforts to improve teacher quality, increase K–12 education spending, expand parent choice, raise standards, and hold adults accountable for student outcomes. Rejecting the premise that schools can be expected to address the challenges that come with poverty and other forms of disadvantage, a second set of ideas has advocated for fundamental changes to social safety net programs with the aim of increasing family well-being through improved access to housing, health care, and income. While both of these approaches probably have a role to play in improving outcomes for children and leveling the playing field between families of different circumstances, both have proven difficult to operationalize, given the existing policy and political constraints.

Furthermore, changes to the economy and labor markets are likely to disrupt the conventional wisdom about educational equity. Policymakers need more nimble solutions that address the full scope of existing inequality and accommodate the changes that are likely to unfold in the future. These may include:

- Auditing access to out-of-school learning experiences.

- Financially supporting access to nonschool-based educational services.

- Investing in guidance and support to help families navigate their options.

- Tracking access to and success in postsecondary education pathways.

- Developing evidence-based approaches to supporting student success.

- Addressing preparation gaps that challenge student success in high school and beyond.

Audit access to out-of-school learning experiences

A first step to addressing the growth in educational inequality is to ensure our assessments of equity incorporate the full spectrum of learning experiences that students today can benefit from. While cities and towns around the country routinely collect and report data on enrollments in K–12 public schools to support planning around education, very few have sought to understand access to out-of-school learning experiences, including enrichment activities like summer camps, apprenticeships and other opportunities for work, and nonschool-based academic supports. As is true with high-choice cities where charter schools enroll a growing share of students, collecting data on out-of-school learning experiences is impeded by the fact that the field is dominated by a wide range of public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations, including public recreation centers, community service groups like the YMCA and the United Way, and businesses specializing in recreation, STEM, and the arts. The lack of regulation and oversight has probably helped to support the wide range of options that are available, but it has also meant that data is difficult to collect or act upon.

An audit of out-of-school learning experiences could be broad or narrow in scope. It could start with tracking school-based enrichment programs, grow to assess summer learning opportunities, and eventually incorporate other types of learning experiences like tutoring, SAT preparation, apprenticeships, and college/career counseling. City leaders could track access along dimensions such as cost, location, and accommodations for students with special needs as a starting point for identifying ways to improve access for historically disadvantaged students. As part of a University of Washington "Data Science for Social Good" project, data scientists mapped access to summer learning opportunities in Denver, Colorado, providing one model for policymakers to consider as they look to assess access to out-of-school learning experiences.

Financially support students' access to nonschool-based educational services

While additional research is needed to understand the source of inequities in out-of-school learning, cost is likely to be a significant factor. To date, efforts to address cost barriers to out-of-school learning and valuable unpaid work experiences have been limited. For nonprofit providers like the YMCA, scholarships can enable some families to take advantage of out-of-school learning. But because of the diffuse and fragmented nature of these programs, families must submit multiple applications to access learning experiences with different providers. Cities have sought to expand access by directly offering services through community-based service centers (e.g., city recreation centers). While these offer a more inclusive option than privately managed providers, they also have the effect of artificially limiting the options available to families.

For students to have access to a diverse array of out-of-school learning experiences and valuable but unpaid work experience, any financial support offered should be portable. States and cities could create education accounts that families can use to access opportunities outside of traditional K–12 schools. These could function like an education savings account (ESA) but rather than being broadly applicable to any educational experience (including, for example, a private school education), they could be limited to supporting out-of-school learning and other student development services. This also would make such accounts more politically palatable in blue states and cities, since they wouldn't pose a direct threat to traditional public schools.

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Invest in guidance and support to help families navigate their options

Any parent who has enrolled their child in summer camp or sought admission to college knows how fraught the process can be. As cities have opened up opportunities for parent choice in traditional and charter K–12 public schools, funders and policymakers have made a concerted effort to invest in supports to help families navigate their options. If our vantage point grows to include out-of-school learning and an expanded array of postsecondary offerings, the landscape becomes even more fragmented, with families struggling to get even basic information on program offerings.

Cities could invest in informational resources that catalogue different types of learning resources (enrichment, summer camps, apprenticeships, etc.) and postsecondary pathways as a starting point to shore up support for families (see Betheny Gross's essay for examples of informational resources). These resources would enable families to directly compare and contrast different program offerings on the basis of costs, services provided, and other features. But information guides are unlikely to address all the gaps observed in access to these experiences, given that different programs serve different functions, and a set of programs can add up to either a coherent learning agenda or a random collection of activities.

Cities could also consider leveraging some of the resources set aside for funding out-of-school learning to support mentors, counselors, or navigators trained to help families pull different resources together. Models of such services already exist. The nonprofit EdNavigator provides one-on-one support to families around education. This includes work to help families identify schools that will meet their needs, but also advice about out-of-school learning resources and college admissions. Treehouse is a nonprofit focused on helping foster children develop an education plan for their future. Specialists work one-on-one with students to create a plan for high school graduation and beyond, connect to resources like tutoring, and address barriers to learning.

These programs are valuable precisely because they are personalized. Each family comes to the table with unique needs and challenges, and support providers can tailor the advice and assistance they offer to each family's circumstances and long-term goals for their child's education.

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Complex learners face particular challenges when identifying resources that will support their unique learning needs. Many providers are not required to offer accommodations for students with disabilities, and while specialized programs exist, these provide a limited set of options. Cities could invest in curated information resources and programs for students with special education needs.

Track access to and success in postsecondary education pathways

The expanding array of postsecondary education pathways creates new options for students to engage in higher education and join the workforce. But to ensure that new pathways do not replicate existing inequalities, policymakers must carefully track student access to and success across postsecondary offerings.

Not all postsecondary education pathways are created equal—they vary in the quality of their programming, the types of jobs they prepare students for, and the extent to which students exiting such programs are prepared for rewarding careers. Policymakers should support the collection of data on student access as well as longer-term data on employment and earnings. Not only will such information empower families to evaluate whether a given postsecondary program is preparing students for the workforce, it could position policymakers to identify problems and improve the quality of existing offerings.

Develop evidence-based approaches to supporting student success

There is little question that today's achievement tests provide at best a poor proxy to the types of skills and knowledge that students will need to succeed in life. And yet we lack reliable methods for tracking nonachievement-based student outcomes or evidence-based strategies for supporting the development of a broader array of student outcomes. A starting point to address these challenges lies in building the evidence base around both assessments and interventions.

While growing frustration with "achievement only" accountability systems has led many states to incorporate new measures, such efforts are probably premature, given the current evidence base. Instead, states and localities should encourage smaller-scale efforts to test, measure, and improve nonachievement-based academic and nonacademic outcomes. Tacoma Public Schools in Washington state, for example, launched the Whole Child Initiative in an effort to build students' social-emotional skills and develop learner communities. Participating schools have worked to develop, define, and teach social-emotional skills through implementation of evidence-based interventions like Second Step, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and Zones of Regulation. Tacoma is one of six urban districts working to develop students' social-emotional skills through investments by the Wallace Foundation.

Address preparation gaps that challenge student success in high school and beyond

To ensure that historically disadvantaged students can fully tap into the expanded array of learning experiences and postsecondary education pathways, it is essential to address the preparation gaps that leave too many of these students ill prepared. Addressing preparation gaps will require a multipronged approach that could include:

- Expanding investments in early childhood, especially birth through age three, when rapid brain development means that interventions can pay considerable dividends.

- Establishing school feeder patterns that develop students' academic and social-emotional skills earlier so they are prepared for the heightened levels of autonomy offered in out-of-school, work-based, and postsecondary opportunities.

- Supporting the adoption of evidence-based approaches to developing students' social-emotional skills.

Unlock a continuum of child development services

Today, most states, cities, and towns around the country host a range of public and nonprofit organizations that offer services related to child development. The problem is that these services are too often uncoordinated, resulting in duplication of effort, administrative waste, and less targeted and effective programming. Imagine if the patchwork of city and nonprofit programs that exist today worked together to align services and create a continuum of supports for healthy child development.

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Addressing the fragmentation that exists in the field will not be easy. Turf wars and competition for philanthropic support and enrollment are likely to undermine the field's incentive to work together toward common ends. To build goodwill, local leaders might convene key actors and build a shared vision for out-of-school learning and child development services. This would include public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations with missions related to education, including enrichment providers, after-school programs, organizations offering camps, and college and career counselors. It might also include members of the business community, who could offer aligned internship and apprenticeship opportunities. In the longer term, local communities might work to align the governance and financing of services related to child development. This might include a city commission responsible for making investments in new services, auditing existing services for gaps, and convening actors to support continued alignment.

Conclusion

To be sure, none of these investments are a substitute for strong classroom-based instruction. There is much to be gained from continued work to improve public schools as they currently exist, while they continue to face challenges related to underinvestment, shortages of teacher talent, and weaknesses in curriculum and instructional support.

But a vision for educational equality must address all of the factors that shape students' educational experiences—including access to out-of-school enrichment, preparation for postsecondary education, and domains of learning that are not captured by traditional achievement measures but may be crucial to allowing students to succeed in 21st century learning environments. Wealthy families increasingly use the resources at their disposal to provide these experiences for their children. A truly equitable public education system would ensure these experiences are equally available to everyone, and allow disadvantaged families to exercise the same levels of choice and agency as their more advantaged counterparts.

If people who care about public education do not open themselves up to new ways to address inequality, not only will they give up the chance to break through the political deadlock that has characterized school reform fights, but they also are unlikely to make headway in equalizing opportunity for American students.

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