

# Equity and Excellence in American Education

EDUCATION POLICY BRIEFING SHEET

## Equity and Excellence in American Education

During the past century, public education was the means by which a land of opportunity fulfilled its promise, ensuring that each generation was better off than the one before. Yet, the role of education in social mobility has been threatened by mounting economic inequality, *de facto* resegregation of schools, pressures to integrate large numbers of immigrants, fragmentation of families and communities, and weaknesses in the resources and organization of educational institutions.

Our nation's education system cannot truly be excellent if it is not equitable—our aim must be for *all* children to learn and acquire needed skills. Gaps in opportunity lead to gaps in educational outcomes. Educational opportunity should simply not depend on a child's family background. Student learning is fostered by policies that consider the strengths that each child brings and that provide active, engaging, and supportive means for children to meet high expectations. Giving low-income and minority children challenging and rich learning opportunities can have a profound positive impact on their lives, but such programs have rarely been implemented or sustained on a large scale.

Effective interventions require multiple reforms: effective teaching practices, engaging students in classrooms, leadership, opportunities for teachers to continue to learn, rigorous curricula and assessments, and family and community involvement. However, far-reaching policies have sometimes been implemented without supporting evidence, and policies intended to be helpful can have unexpected negative effects (e.g., research consistently shows that tracking and grade retention actually reduce learning opportunities for many students).

The policy challenge is to expand effective educational practices. We must invest to reduce opportunity gaps at entry into graded schooling, the transition from “learning to read to reading to learn,” entry into secondary school, completion of the high school diploma, and access to post-secondary schooling, and focus on education for the large and growing numbers of English language learners and students with learning problems.

**Recommendation: The federal government should invest in strategies that are supported by research evidence to increase educational opportunity and excellence for all students across their school career.**

A balance between placing special needs students into discrete programs and integrating them into mainstream programs is increasingly being achieved by approaches that offer tiers of progressively more intense support strategies for struggling students. The federal government should provide incentives for states and districts to develop local versions of interventions and assessment systems to track opportunity to learn and outcomes.

An important role for the federal government is coordinating innovations, data collection, and research to address the academic achievement and language development needs of English language learners. Efforts should be made to undertake a coordinated effort to bring together the federal and state agencies that support research on instruction, assessment, and accountability, as well as the agencies that support the ability to provide wrap-around services for these students. This strategy should include states with



extensive experience in serving English language learners as well as states with limited experience.

High school dropping out is far more prevalent than earlier believed—about 25 percent overall and 50 percent in major urban areas. The elimination of dead-end tracks and grade retention will increase high school graduation, but it should be complemented by programs that engage older, struggling students in school.

Excellence and equity require continuous demonstration, evaluation, and improvement of policy and program effectiveness. Rather than prescribing activities at the state, district, school, and classroom levels, the federal government should promote intelligent data gathering, foster experimentation and evaluation, and create mechanisms and incentives for the diffusion of promising solutions. Federal educational incentives should focus on evidence-based, scalable, incremental, sustainable policies, and not on quick fixes. Promising practices should be improved in successive iterations of implementation, evaluation, and redesign.

**Recommendation: The federal government should support and develop information systems that can be used by policymakers, education practitioners, and others to monitor education progress and accountability.**

Promising strategies include:

- Encouraging states to use uniform definitions of tested populations to increase the comparability of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) achievement reports across states.
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Monitoring specific individual risk factors, such as social background and early learning problems, over students' school careers.

- Measuring longitudinal trajectories of grade progression and attainment (including grades, aspirations, expectations, and educational transitions) at the school, district, state, and national levels and in key population subgroups.
- Supporting statistical design, data documentation, data management, and training to make these data resources useful for policy and action (e.g., retaining the classification of English language learners who achieve full competence in English in their school record would make it much easier to track their success).
- Creating and supporting longitudinal, standardized, and comprehensive state-based student tracking systems; the federal government should work with states to encourage the development of these nascent systems in individual states and in consortia of states.
- Supporting states to participate in international comparative assessments (e.g., the Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA, and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study – TIMSS), and possibly in conjunction with state NAEP so that states can compare their progress relative to international benchmarks.

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