

ABANDON SCHOOL REFORMS THAT REINFORCE INEQUALITY IN FAVOR OF THOSE THAT CENTER RACIAL AND CLASS EQUITY

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PROBLEM

Schools are an extension of society. Unfortunately, US schools are an extension of a society that is woefully inequitable along class and racial lines. The myriad inequalities experienced by students across the PK-12 educational landscape throughout the US have long been documented and understood as reflective of broad and systemic oppression. Such school-based inequalities include, but are not limited to, the manifestations of broad inequitable school funding based on property tax that result in lower teacher experience levels (more experienced teachers cost more) and a higher concentration of alternatively certified teachers, as well as outdated school and classroom materials such as textbooks and technology. Broad societal inequalities—including access to nutritious food, safe housing, medical care, dental care, vision care, and transportation—are all among the societal factors that inform schooling opportunities and outcomes that simply cannot be improved by reforms to school policies alone.

Unfortunately, school reform policies have, for too long, focused on standardized testing and the privatization of schools by way of charters and vouchers as a purported ailment to inequality while, in fact, exacerbating racial and class segregation. Even more, in addition to reinforcing the very inequalities such reforms purport to fix, the shifting of public school resources into private hands, in effect, makes the lived inequalities even greater in terms of who has access and what educational opportunities remain when public schools are drained of their resources.

While the shift to distance/digital learning during COVID-19 followed the recommendations of public health officials and assuredly saved lives, it has brought a magnifying glass onto socioeconomic disparities and how they are often manifested in our schools. Students who struggled with food insecurity suddenly had to navigate disparate attempts by school districts to provide food. Instruction occurring online remained out of reach for many students who did not have reliable access to a computer or an internet connection with enough power to facilitate video class meetings. As schools often play a vital role in the reporting of child abuse, referrals to social workers and law enforcement in Georgia declined by as much as 50% during the Spring semester – suggesting a growth in undetected abuse. Understanding that social and economic disparities in the US fall along racial lines, it is of little surprise that the exacerbation of schooling inequalities have likely hurt students of color the most during the lockdowns.

KEY STATISTIC

Two-thirds of the variance of student academic outcomes are explained by out-of-school societal factors.¹

SOLUTIONS

During and beyond COVID, schools can provide opportunities to alleviate the harms of socioeconomic and racial inequities through policies that center marginalized groups. With the specter of continued distance learning, districts must expand food service to students, provide equitable technology and internet access, and implement some type of wellness check-ins for students.

Framework for Equitable Policies

- Is the policy culturally responsive to its intended population (e.g., are voices of people of color, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized groups being included)?
- Does the policy bridge gaps between educators and community stakeholders?
- Does the policy ameliorate or exacerbate the systemic inequalities that exist outside of schools?
- Does the policy ameliorate or exacerbate the systemic inequalities that exist inside of schools?
- Does the policy appropriately consider the peer-reviewed literature?

¹ Berliner, D. C. (2013). Effects of inequality and poverty vs. teachers and schooling on America's youth. *Teachers College Record*, 115, 1-26.