

A Solution to the Problem We All Live With

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Nikole Hannah Jones has reported on the inequality of education offered between underprivileged school districts and more affluent school districts for over a decade. In her podcast on This American Life with Ira Glass titled “The Problem We All Live With”, Jones recounts how she has visited several schools over the years, all attempting various programs aimed at decreasing the performance gap between black and white students; but she says no one really wants to do the one thing that has ever historically worked: Integration. She highlights two examples in recent history: the national effort to desegregate our public schools from 1971 to 1988, and the case of the Normandy School District in 2013, which had its accreditation revoked by the state of Missouri after years of underperformance, and resulted in an unplanned integration effort that greatly benefitted the students that participated. Jones believes this had everything to do with the quality of the teachers, and the quality of the instruction they provided. Better provisioned schools are simply in a better position to provide students the best chance at a successful scholastic experience. I will argue that reducing the inequality of funding to underperforming schools will enable them to attract better qualified teachers and offer educational programs commensurate to those at higher performing, predominately white schools in more affluent neighborhoods.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson said, “Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty.” Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

According to the U.S. Department of Education website, education funding is primarily a state and local responsibility where they provide 91 percent of the funding and the Federal Government provides about 9 percent, which is comprised of funds from the Department of

Education, and other Federal agencies like Head Start from the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Agriculture's School Lunch program. While these programs are certainly appreciated by those who benefit from them, that is a woefully inadequate contribution and incapable of making up the inequity of funding in the current system. According to the January 2018 report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR, herein referred to as the Commission) titled "Public Education Funding Inequity in an Era of Increasing Concentration of Poverty and Resegregation", there are fundamental funding inequities at the local level. The Commission stated, "...nearly half of all public elementary-secondary school system funds were drawn from local government revenue. As such, the level of local revenue that is provided for public education is correlated to property values in a particular school district. For decades, this correlation has been a cause for concern, as disparities in wealth can create fundamental inequities in school funding between high-poverty and low-poverty districts." (Commission, 2018). This essentially means that high-poverty areas have underfunded schools, which certainly is, and has been a bar to learning and definitely does not provide those in poverty a path of escape. Glass, in his interview with Jones, points out, "The US Department of Education put out data in 2014 showing that black and Latino kids in segregated schools have the least qualified teachers, the least experienced teachers. They also get the worst course offerings, the least access to AP and upper level courses, the worst facilities." (Glass, 2015). If anything, the current enduring state of education has been demonstrated to reinforce and exacerbate poverty conditions, since the poor quality of education received by underprivileged students does not prepare them to rise out of the conditions they were born to. Thus, the schools in these areas actually perpetuate the very conditions that these students need to escape from. This is because

they are not equipped to deal with the conditions these students come from, which must be dealt with before learning can even occur.

Jones, referring to most segregated black schools, observes, “They have high concentrations of children who grew up in poverty. Those kids have greater educational needs. They're more stressed out. They have a bunch of disadvantages. And when you put a lot of kids like that together in one classroom, studies show, it doesn't go well.” (Jones, 2015). Therefore, teachers in these schools need to be trained in more than simple curriculum facilitation. They need to be trained in conflict resolution, and they need to be prepared to address the special needs of these students in such a way that makes school a refuge from the reality in which they live; and they should be better compensated for their expertise. Jones addresses the stark reality of most of these schools when she says, “And then they're getting the worst teacher. So it's not even like they're getting the same quality teachers as kids who are advanced. They're getting worse teachers. When you combine those two things, it is almost impossible to undo that harm. You have to break that up.” (Jones, 2015). However, in order to attract these better teachers, there needs to be incentives, particularly in the area of pay. This means that there needs to be more spending in high-poverty areas, rather than less. That does not necessarily mean that more money is needed (although it might), so much as a more equitable distribution of funds that are currently raised at the state and local level. Yet currently, the Commission reports that, “In more than half of all states, high-poverty school districts receive less funding than low-poverty school districts, and in nearly half of all states, high-poverty school districts spend less on education than low poverty school districts.” (Commission, 2018). This means that state and local school boards are clearly preferring low-poverty schools over the high-poverty schools that are in crucial need of the funding. So what is the solution? Two recommendations of the Commission are key to

solving this inequity: 1) Congress should incentivize states to ensure equitable school funding according to the level of student need (disability or socioeconomic disadvantage) and provide facilities suitable to the goal of scholastic achievement. 2) Congress should supplement state funding and ensure appropriate stewardship of the funds in regards to the effectiveness of expenditure.

Left to their own vices, the States will continue to accept Federal funding and use it to prop up higher performing schools to “pad their numbers”. The recommendations above bring an element of accountability that ensures those schools in need are actually getting the required funding. They also place the additional requirement on the Federal government to supplement state funding to bring underfunded schools up to the level of funding received by other low-poverty schools. Once schools are funded, staffed, and provisioned to the same level as higher performing low-poverty school districts, we can realize a return on investment in the form of increased student performance, a decreasing performance gap, and other benefits that come with increasing the pool of educated and creative minds entering society’s workforce.

Not all members of the Commission were in agreement with their findings, or their recommendations. In fact, Commissioner Peter Kirsanow filled his dissenting comments with every ounce of exasperation and disgust he could muster when he commented, “Fine. Spend more money. Lots and lots of money. Spew money into the educational air like you’re drilling for oil and just hit a gusher. But it won’t matter. Nothing much will change. Because the primary problem with our education system is not lack of money.” He goes on to identify what he thinks, at least in part, is actually the problem when he states, “The children in these families suffer less from material poverty than from the structural poverty of growing up in chaotic, dysfunctional, single-parent households. This is not blaming the victim. This is acknowledging reality,

something the report strenuously endeavors to avoid.” (Kirsanow, 2018). Kirsanow goes on to blame single parent families and the “illegitimate” status of their children as the reason for their poor scholastic performance, and the state of the rest of their lives after school. His attitude toward these families and their children is as dismissive as his thoughts about the Commission’s findings; which is that it was a waste of time and that they would have been better off “...going door-to-door in poor and working class neighborhoods populated by people of all races and handing out pictures of rainbows and unicorns.” (Kirsanow, 2018). Kirsanow seems to think that these impoverished families are incapable of bettering themselves through education. He is essentially saying that more money to improve these schools, and to provide equality of education for children of impoverished single mothers, (as he overgeneralizes them all in this category) is money wasted. Yet he ignores the preponderance of evidence to the contrary. They are impoverished because they lack the educational opportunities, yet their educational opportunities are affected by the financially disadvantaged state of their school district. It seems like a catch-22, but it need not be.

Education offers these children a chance to break a cycle that may well have affected their families for generations. Perhaps that is supposition on my part, but we won’t know until there is equality of educational opportunity in this country, and we will not have that until all schools are funded and staffed equally, regardless of the racial majority of the students in attendance. Continuing to underfund impoverished school districts is to perpetuate the cycle that causes the poverty. Education, equivalent to that of their more affluent peers of any color, is the path out of poverty for these children.