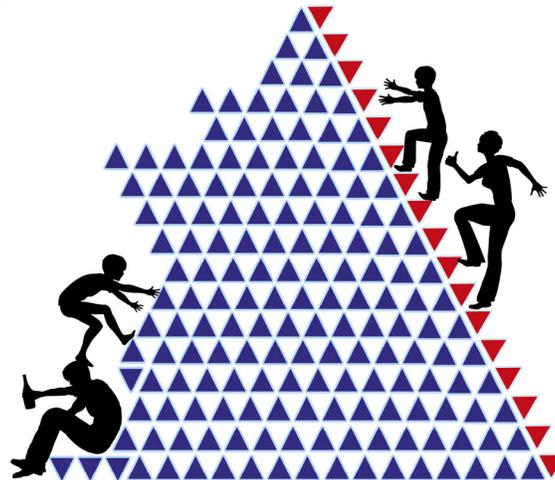




NEW PROJECT EXPLORES WHAT IT WOULD COST TO CREATE “THE GREAT EQUALIZER”



Those of us who work in or with schools never question the enormous impact that a teacher or school can have on a student. But this essential truth coexists with another truth: that differences between schools account for a relatively small portion of measured outcome differences. That is, opportunity gaps in the U.S. arise primarily outside of schools.

This should not be a surprise. Poverty, concentrated poverty, and racialized poverty are pervasive features of America. School improvement efforts cannot directly help children and their families overcome decades of policies that perpetuate systemic racism and economic inequality. When children are born in the United States, their educational and life outcomes can all be predicted based on their parents' education, income, and wealth. Compared to the Scandinavian countries and other so-called Western democracies like Canada, Spain, Australia, and New Zealand, American children are inordinately trapped in intergenerational poverty. Inequality in the U.S. is stark and enduring.

There are two primary ways to change this. The first way is the most obvious: directly reducing poverty by improving the social safety net and adopting programs that end racialized and concentrated poverty. Yet most U.S. policymakers have instead embraced a second approach, at least rhetorically: to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by providing children with high-quality public schooling. In articulating this approach, politicians often use the term “Great Equalizer,” taken from a passage in Horace Mann’s 12th Annual Report to the Massachusetts State Board of Education (1848). President Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan, for instance, asserted at a college graduation in 2011 that, “in America, education is still the great equalizer.” President Trump’s Education Secretary Betsy DeVos agreed: “Education is indeed the great equalizer.” President Biden’s Secretary Miguel Car-

dona, at his Senate confirmation hearing, said, “If I am fortunate enough to be confirmed, I will work tirelessly to make sure our education system is a door to opportunity, a great equalizer, for every American.”

This is a high bar, placing enormous expectations on the public school system. Exactly *how high* is the question NEPC researchers are trying to answer with the [Price of Opportunity Project](#), which is working with students, parents, community members, and researchers to understand how schools could move closer to the “Great Equalizer” ideal. The research project is providing us with details about policies, practices, interventions, and price tags. It also is providing us with insights about the need to integrate school-centric and social-system reforms and programs—which is the issue tackled in the second of this two-part newsletter series.

NEPC Resources on School Finance and Funding

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