



Innovating to End Urban Poverty

PROPOSED EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS TO REDUCE INCOME-BASED ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

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Individual and family characteristics account for a far greater proportion of student achievement than schools. However, schools remain fertile ground for public policies that can raise the achievement level of low-income students and boost their long-term prospects.

With a growing gap between the average achievement of high- and low-income students, education is more important than ever. Recent research suggests that the increasing disparity is due to rapid achievement growth by the highest-income children rather than declining performance by disadvantaged students. In fact, highest-income children are outperforming the middle class to the same degree that the middle class outperforms the poor.

The success of upper-income children reflects in part their families' investments of time and money. By age 6, the typical child of a high-income family has substantially outpaced his or her low-income counterpart in terms of time spent reading and on other non-school activities that stimulate learning.

The four recommendations below attempt to both improve educational attainment and positively affect the out-of-school investments that we know are important but typically more difficult for public policy to address. The

principles underlying these recommendations are:

- combat instability in low-income families and schools by intervening in a child's earliest years and at key junctures, such as school selection;
- piggyback on U.S. Department of Education programs that have gained momentum, namely the competitive grant programs that encourage state and district innovations; and
- Reserve the largest investments for programs with proven outcomes; invest smaller dollars in unproven, but promising ideas.

The four recommendations are:

The Innovating to End Urban Poverty policy brief series details policy recommendations from top researchers and practitioners on how to improve the quality of life for low-income urban residents. Topics include education, housing, health care, executive function, immigration and the role of place.

Major investment: Focus the next generation of Early Learning Challenge Grants on improving quality measures. Programs to influence early learning can have a profound effect on a child’s language, math, reading, and social skills, leading to better adult learning and income, lower crime, and reduced expense on remedial programs. Studies have produced mixed results about how effective various programs are in producing lasting education gains for different student populations.

As resources are directed to the implementation and improvement of state-level early childhood education programs, it is imperative to ensure that programs are of high quality. As access to early childhood programs ramp up in many states, this is the time to examine what to measure, how to measure it, how often, at what cost, and where to regulate or offer incentives for increased quality. These questions must be answered before state quality ratings systems become entrenched.

Major investment: Retool the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program to focus on longevity of implementation. The average poverty rate is 78 percent in schools that have received School Improvement Grants, which target the bottom performing 5 percent of schools. The concentration of poverty in these schools manifests in higher turnover of quality teachers and administrators, higher student absenteeism, embattled school environments, fewer economic resources, and lower rates of parental involvement.

The SIG competitive three-year grants, which range up to \$2 million each, have been awarded to approximately 1,500 low-performing schools since the program started in 2009. To qualify, schools must agree to one of four turnaround strategies, ranging from the least invasive (replacing the school principal, implementing a

reform plan, and rewarding teacher performance) to the most (school closure). Little evidence is available that any of the four approaches works.

Models for comprehensive reform that have proven effective generally take three to five years to show results. The SIG program would be improved by allowing a longer implementation period, perhaps five to 10 years—a more realistic period for refining and adapting a reform plan in the midst of inevitable changes in school leadership and staffing. To further avoid the common problem of school reform plans trying to do too much too quickly, SIG should also prioritize relatively simple plans with extremely clear and relatively fewer goals. Finally, SIG should drop the mandate that schools chose one of the four prescribed turnaround plans in favor of a more flexible approach.

Minor investment: Improve dissemination of school information to parents during periods of choice. Parents face increasing options when deciding which school is best for their children. This is especially true for urban parents, who must navigate charter schools, magnet schools, school vouchers, open enrollment periods, managed or controlled choice plans, and tuition tax credits—sometimes across multiple districts. Research suggests the information available to parents is not high-quality enough, that parents have difficulty navigating various application cycles and admissions processes, and that too many choices can induce “choice fatigue.”

Providing targeted, relevant information for parents is better—for example, offering information about their effective set of choices, perhaps based on location, grade levels, or school type. Because there is little evidence of what works best in helping parents with this task, existing competitive grant vehicles, such

as Investing in Innovation grants, could be tied to new models for distributing information. For example, retired teachers or principals could be hired to serve as coaches helping parents through the process. An “online coach” could walk parents through set of decisions to yield a relevant, filtered list of schools to choose among. Live coaching could be delivered through existing programs, such as the Nurse Family Partnership or housing counseling conducted by public housing authorities.

Minor investment: Educate parents to educate children. Even though research casts doubt on the effectiveness of programs that attempt to improve school achievement by altering parental behavior, parents are too important to ignore when it comes to influencing early learning experiences and reducing the income-based achievement gap.

A relatively low-risk, low-cost approach would be to solicit ideas for pilot programs aimed

at reducing barriers faced by parents in promoting their children’s education. Delivering information to parents could be as simple as text messaging or could be combined with existing services. Testing several pilot ideas on a small scale would minimize the risk of any one failure.

CONCLUSION

These recommendations would combine large investments to improve existing in-school programs and less-expensive initiatives to affect hard-to-change, out-of-school influences. Action is needed on both fronts to attack the growing income-based gap in student achievement.

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