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Why Is Congress Redlining Our Schools?

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Redlining was the once-common practice in which banks would draw a red line on a map—often along a natural barrier like a highway or river—to designate neighborhoods where they would not invest. Stigmatized and denied access to loans and other resources, redlined communities, populated by African-Americans and other people of color, often became places that lacked businesses, jobs, grocery stores and other services, and thus could not retain a thriving middle class. Redlining produced and reinforced a vicious cycle of decline for which residents themselves were typically blamed.

Today a new form of redlining is emerging. If passed, the long-awaited Senate bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) would build a bigger highway between low-performing schools serving high-need students—the so-called "bottom 5 percent"—and all other schools. Tragically, the proposed plan would weaken schools in the most vulnerable communities and further entrench the problems—concentrated poverty, segregation and lack of human and fiscal resources—that underlie their failure.

Although the current draft of the law scales back some of the worst overreaches of No Child Left Behind, the sanctions for failing to make "adequate yearly progress" that have threatened all schools under NCLB are now focused solely on the 5 percent of schools designated as lowest-performing by the states. As we have learned in warm-up exercises offered by the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative, these schools will nearly always be the ones serving the poorest students and the greatest numbers of new immigrants. In many states they will represent a growing number of apartheid schools populated almost entirely by low-income African-American and Latino students in our increasingly race- and class-segregated system.

In the new vision for ESEA, these schools, once identified, will be subjected to school "turnaround" models that require the schools to be closed, turned into charters, reconstituted (by firing nearly half the staff) or "transformed," according to a complicated set of requirements that include everything from instructional reforms to test-based teacher evaluation. The proposed array of punitive sanctions, coupled with unproven reforms, will increasingly destabilize schools and neighborhoods, making them even less desirable places to work and live and stimulating the flight of teachers and families who have options.

Meanwhile, the most important solutions for these students and their schools are ignored by NCLB and the proposed new bill, as well as by current federal policy in general, leaving their most serious problems unaddressed.

There is no plan in the current or proposed ESEA or in other federal legislation to stem the rapid slide of families into poverty, homelessness and food insecurity; to address the inequitable distribution of state and local funds to schools; to improve teaching and learning conditions in underfunded, high-poverty schools; or to recruit and train expert teachers who will stay in these schools and stop the revolving door of untrained novices who leave children further behind. There are no significant investments in training to better prepare teachers to teach new English learners, students with disabilities and others with a range of needs.

There is no major investment in preschool or in wraparound services that will address the many needs of children for extended learning time, healthcare and social services so they can learn. While a recent Race to the Top initiative offers some preschool funding, it is minuscule in relation to the need and will not make up for the huge cuts in these services occurring in communities across the country. (After widespread cuts, preschool spending at the end of 2010 stood at almost $700 per pupil less than in 2001. Meanwhile, state cuts to education spending reached more than $7.5 billion this year on top of $3 billion in cuts last year.)

It's not as though we don't know what works. We could implement the policies that have reduced the achievement gap and transformed learning outcomes for students in high-achieving nations where government policies largely prevent childhood poverty by guaranteeing housing, healthcare and basic income security. These same strategies were substantially successful in our own nation through the programs and policies of the war on poverty and the Great Society, which dramatically reduced poverty, increased employment, rebuilt depressed communities, invested in preschool and K-12 education in cities and poor rural areas, desegregated schools, funded financial aid for college and invested in teacher training programs that ended teacher shortages. In the 1970s teaching in urban communities was made desirable by the higher-than-average salaries, large scholarships and forgivable loans that subsidized teacher preparation, and by the exciting curriculum and program innovations that federal funding supported in many city school districts.

These efforts led to big improvements in achievement and attainment from the '60s through the '80s. The black-white reading gap shrank by two-thirds for 17-year-olds, black high school and college graduation rates more than doubled, and, in 1975, rates of college attendance among whites, blacks and Latinos reached parity for the first and only time before or since.

Almost all the programs described above were ended or shrunk in the '80s, targets of the Reagan revolution, which systematically sought to dismantle federal supports for urban and rural development, housing, social services and education. Poverty and homelessness increased sharply. As the federal education budget was cut in half, funding for urban and poor rural schools declined precipitously, desegregation aid was discontinued and teaching supports were reduced, leading to growing shortages when teacher demand increased in the late 1980s. Despite some modest pushback during the Clinton years, the momentum toward increasing inequality was not reversed.

How Educational Redlining Works

The racial and economic segregation that sets the stage for redlining is now firmly in place. One in four American children lives in poverty, nearly 60 percent more than in 1974, and the number of people living in severe poverty has reached a record high. A national study released in 2009 found that one in fifty children in America is homeless and living in a shelter, motel, car, shared housing, abandoned building, park or orphanage. The proportions in some school districts exceed one in ten, and the number is growing rapidly.

Furthermore, this poverty is concentrated in increasingly resegregated communities and schools. More than 70 percent of black and Latino students attend predominantly minority schools, and nearly 40 percent attend intensely segregated schools, where more than 90 percent of students are minority and most are poor.

Poverty rates make a huge difference in student achievement. Few people are aware, for example, that in 2009 US schools with fewer than 10 percent of students in poverty ranked first among all nations on the Programme for International Student Achievement tests in reading, while those serving more than 75 percent of students in poverty scored alongside nations like Serbia, ranking about fiftieth.

The schools identified as low-performing not only serve a growing underclass of impoverished families; they also typically do so with fewer state and local dollars per pupil than wealthier districts around them. Unlike high-achieving nations that fund their schools centrally and equally, most American states spend three times more on their wealthiest schools than they do on their poorest.

In California, for example, urban school districts often spend less than the state average although their children have the greatest needs. With inadequate budgets, crumbling buildings, class sizes of more than thirty (in some cases nearing fifty) and not enough desks or books, many schools serving the neediest students have long ago canceled art, music and physical education, shut down libraries and fired librarians, nurses and counselors. They have lost reading specialists, science teachers and school psychologists. As they suffer cut after cut while they seek to meet the needs of children who are often hungry and homeless as well as shortchanged in terms of educational opportunities, these schools must decide *how* they will underserve their students, not *whether* they will.

These disparities in school funding also lead to disparities in salaries and working conditions, which create shortages of qualified personnel in high-need districts. A recent study found that in California and New York, for example, the highest-spending districts offer salaries more than twice as high as those in the lowest-spending districts. Even within a single region, the average teacher in high-poverty Oakland earned $54,000 in 2009 while her counterpart in wealthy Portola Valley (home to Silicon Valley industrialists) earned $89,000. Nationally, teachers in low-poverty districts earn one-third more at the top of the salary range than those in high-poverty districts. And the teachers

who work in the neediest communities also manage larger classes with fewer books, materials and supports of all kinds.

These disparities are greatest across districts, but they are exacerbated further within most large districts, where resources are unequally distributed. It is no surprise then that the Education Department recently reported that schools serving mostly African-American students are twice as likely to have teachers with only one or two years of experience than schools in the same district serving mostly white students. Because they are less experienced and educated, teachers at schools with more Latino and African-American students are paid $2,500 less on average than teachers in the district as a whole.

Now comes the federal government to announce that such schools—where students score lower on tests than in more advantaged communities—should be labeled as failing and threatened with closure or staff firings. This makes educational redlining official. The federal share of less than 10 percent of school budgets is a tiny drop in the bucket, and far from enough to tip the scales that are so dramatically out of balance. Not only is there no plan in federal law to tackle poverty, segregation or the massive state and local underfunding of these schools; the plans embodied in Senate ESEA proposals are likely to undermine these communities even further.

How Federal Policy Can Make Things Worse

Today, NCLB—and plans to replace it—deliver primarily on the promise of more tests and sanctions. New proposals would focus the law's punishments even more pointedly on schools in high-need communities and on educators who are willing to serve in these schools, where they earn lower salaries, teach larger classes, deal with more stress and spend longer hours than those who work in more affluent schools. This passes for accountability in America. It is also a recipe for educational redlining.

The test-and-punish approach to school reform has already made it more difficult for schools labeled as failing to attract and retain well-qualified educators—thus, ironically, reducing the quality of education for students still further. Rather than increasing the incentives and supports for teaching in high-need schools, recent federal policy has encouraged states to lower standards for prospective teachers, despite evidence that doing so increases teacher attrition and reduces student achievement. Blaming teachers for the ills of high-need schools lets policy-makers off the hook and keeps the more fundamental problems of severe poverty, a tattered safety net and inequitable funding under the rug.

Instead of making long-term investments in these communities, the strategies promoted in Race to the Top and the current proposals for ESEA will cordon off "failing" public schools and seek to close, replace or reconstitute them, or use them to experiment with high-risk reforms like for-profit educational management firms.

These approaches have a dubious track record. Many reconstitutions—where staff are fired and replaced—have resulted in a less qualified teaching staff and lower achievement after the reform. The largest national studies of charters have found that while some are

highly successful, most are more likely to underperform than to outperform district-run schools serving similar students. Moreover, the fact that charters enroll fewer English learners and special education students makes it difficult to compare their performance with that of other public schools.

The school replacement strategy is far from a panacea. An independent evaluation of Chicago's Renaissance initiative—which aimed to replace 100 schools with redesigned schools, charters and "contract schools" run by entrepreneurs—found that the achievement of students in the new schools had not improved relative to comparison students and that both groups continued to be very low-performing. Meanwhile, the disruptions to communities were severe. Many students were shipped out to distant schools, creating long, dangerous travel conditions; others were not accepted by the new schools; and still others dropped out when their schools were closed. An effort to launch another round of closings and turnarounds led to vehement public protests that closed down a school board meeting in December. "We see through the sound bites. You have betrayed the public trust!" one protester yelled. "You have failed Chicago's children."

More troubling, pressure to raise test scores has led many schools to exclude students who are hardest to teach, either by structuring admissions so that low-achieving students and those with special needs are unlikely to be admitted, or by creating conditions under which they are speedily encouraged to leave. In Houston a study documented a slew of strategies by which schools rid themselves of struggling students. In the brave new world of New Orleans, composed almost entirely of charter schools, the Southern Poverty Law Center had to sue because disabled students could not get access to public education.

Excluding low-scoring students from public schools gets scores up, but it expands the school-to-prison pipeline, which has quadrupled over the past thirty years, along with corrections costs, which now threaten to devour funds that should be spent on education. Most inmates are functionally illiterate and high school dropouts. In a devil's bargain, the public spends as much as $50,000 a year to incarcerate young men on whom it would not spend $10,000 a year for a decent education.

The truth is that the competitive market approach leaves the most vulnerable children behind. It is impossible to punish schools that are struggling without punishing the children they serve. When schools are closed, it is the students and families who suffer the chaos and confusion. And if teaching and leadership positions in high-need communities become even more unappealing as a result of such policies, educators with options will be even less willing to come to or stay in these schools, leaving students and their schools with an even more inexperienced and transient teaching force. This is not a strategy that promises great wins for these students or for the nation.

What We Should Do Instead

We need a new approach to federal policy that makes it possible for all students to succeed and creates the momentum we need to regain our status as an educational leader among nations. The new ESEA must be better than what we've had for the past ten years

—especially for the low-income communities it was intended to serve. To make this happen, Congress and the administration must think differently about the ends and the means of reform.

First, we need to recognize that the growing income gap, unemployment and poverty must be addressed if we are to close the education gap and maintain a stable democratic society. The Occupy movement is beginning to reawaken awareness of how much social inequities have grown in the past thirty years, but few are aware of how intolerable the situation has become in the most marginalized communities. As socioeconomic segregation has increased, policy-makers and pundits are ever more buffered from direct knowledge of how the other half lives.

Although it is not fashionable to say so, we desperately need a jobs bill that will allow all those who want and need to work to take on the many jobs that need doing in America, and we need a major anti-poverty program that will eliminate childhood poverty in the richest nation on earth. The goods bought and the taxes paid by Americans with jobs will be the most important corrective for our lagging economy, and the stability and dignity this provides for families is the most important foundation for children and their learning.

Second, we must finally address the outrageous disparities in school funding that set us apart from other industrialized nations. To help students reach the new, rigorous Common Core standards that states have developed, we must create common resource standards—and incentives to meet them. This should include benchmarks for early childhood education, well-qualified teachers, high-quality curriculums and equitable instructional resources. Consider the nearly 500,000 high school students who want to go to college but, according to the Education Department, do not have access to algebra 2 classes, and the more than 2 million who have no access to calculus classes.

It's not fair to expect students to meet equally high standards if we do not provide them with equal opportunity to succeed. The ESEA should tie standards for equal educational opportunity to standards for learning: indicators of learning opportunities—the availability of qualified teachers, appropriate courses, materials and equipment, and necessary services—should be published alongside test results, and states should be expected to show evidence of progress toward resource equalization along with evidence of learning.

Third, we should equalize learning opportunities outside school, including high-quality preschool education and enriched summer learning opportunities for all students. A major study at Johns Hopkins University found that one-third of the achievement gap between affluent and poor high school students is present at the start of first grade, and two-thirds occurs because of summer learning loss for low-income students. Evidence shows that preschool investments create large returns as students experience less school failure, fewer special education placements and higher graduation and employment rates. High-quality summer programs also help close the achievement gap and prevent students from dropping out. Yet most low-income students do not have access to these opportunities.

Fourth, we must invest in the quality of our educators. Since federal supports for teacher training were dramatically reduced in the ’80s, teacher shortages in schools serving low-income students have increased to the point that there is a revolving door for teachers in these schools. Congress has colluded in lowering preparation standards and creating fast-track alternative certification routes for teachers to fill jobs in high-minority, low-income schools, despite research that shows that these teachers leave faster and reduce student achievement.

Frustrated by this counterproductive approach, a number of organizations representing parents, communities, educators, and civil rights and disability activists have banded together to insist on a higher standard and to advocate for more sensible federal supports for high-quality teaching. Many successful models have been created and documented, but the funding for these programs has been steadily eliminated. The new education law should maintain the NCLB expectation that teachers be fully prepared and qualified for their challenging jobs and then support those goals with service scholarships to underwrite training and high-quality preparation programs in high-need urban and rural communities.

It may sometimes be necessary to close schools, but only as a last resort, after communities have been engaged in diagnosis and decision-making and necessary investments have been made, wraparound services provided and all student needs taken into account. Increased emphasis on parent and community participation in the direction of their public schools should be a key piece of new education law. We must think and act more systemically. We need federal education policy—backed up with state policy—that builds an escalator out of poverty. The 2020 Vision Roadmap produced by the Opportunity to Learn campaign provides one image of how this can be done.

Preventing educational redlining is a moral and a practical issue. The estimated 7,000 students who drop out of school each day represent a human tragedy as well as lost potential for our society. The more than $300 billion a year forgone because of the lost wages and social service costs of dropouts could be spent building strong schools for these students in their neighborhoods.

We must be honest about our challenges and adopt solutions that give all children an opportunity to learn if our nation is going to reclaim its role as a world education leader. We cannot afford to settle for an education law that is looking backward when it is so critically important to bring our future into view.

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