

Educational Equity: Where We Are and Where We Need To Be

BY CONGRESSMAN MICHAEL M. HONDA

Almost sixty years after the 1954 landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared that separate but equal education was unconstitutional, American schools are still woefully unequal along ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic lines. Quick glimpses into urban, rural, and suburban schools expose the vast differences in the quality of education and resources that children in America receive. These are not just incremental differences but reflect qualitatively different educational experiences. These differences are especially worrisome because they result in achievement and opportunity differences for children. Students attending schools in impoverished areas are subject to under-resourced and underperforming schools. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) children, like all other children in America, are subject to this disparity. As a result, America is facing two major achievement gaps: (1) between its own students along socioeconomic and ethnic lines, and (2) between American students and students in other countries.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

The founding core of our nation is that it has been a nation of immigrants who have enriched and contributed to the fabric of America. Over the last several decades, with the increase of immigrants from Asia and Latin America, the changing face of America has never been more prevalent (Pew Social & Demographic Trends 2012; U.S. Census Bureau 2004). From 1989 to 2009, the AAPI K-12 community grew fourfold (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). AAPIs now represent the fastest-growing ethnic population. In fact, by 2019, the number of AAPIs is expected to increase by 31 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2011; Pew Social & Demographic Trends 2012). This demographic change is more than just skin-deep; there are practical implications for the education system. For instance, nearly 40 percent of AAPIs are nonnative English speakers, and local schools will have to adapt to address this changing demographic (Takeuchi and Hune 2009). Public education can no longer be “one size fits all” if it aims to meet the needs of each and every child and afford them every opportunity to be a contributing member of society.

STATE OF ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN EDUCATION

AAPIs are often lauded for their academic performance. Reports cite the high levels of educational attainment and achievement AAPIs demonstrate as a whole (Pew Social & Demographic Trends 2012). For instance, 49 percent of AAPIs in 2010 had a bachelor's degree or greater compared to the national average of 28 percent. However, this model minority myth dangerously deludes the sad reality that not all AAPI children excel academically. The Asian American and Pacific Islander community encompasses forty-eight distinct ethnic groups, and to presume that all of these groups perform in the same manner would be a disservice to the community and our nation (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2012). To assume AAPIs are one homogenous group ignores the group's rich diversity with regard to language, history, culture, socioeconomic background, and country of origin.

Disaggregating the AAPI community to its different groups reveals a dramatically different story. Although the previous statistic painted a positive picture of college education among AAPIs (49 percent), a closer examination shows that approximately two-thirds of Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong and half of Vietnamese adults have not even attended college (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2011). Taking one step back from that, 34 percent of Laotian, 39 percent of Cambodian, and 40 percent of Hmong adults over the age of twenty-five do not even have a high school diploma (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2011).

A look at my home state of California unveils a similar alarming trend in AAPI educational attainment. A 2010 study of high school students noted that 64 percent of AAPIs were proficient or advanced in Algebra 1 by the end of the course, compared to only 39 percent of Whites. However, this aggregate statistic hides the disparities among the AAPIs who were documented: specifically, 79 percent of Koreans and 77 percent of Chinese were proficient or advanced, whereas only 35 percent of Cambodians and Laotians were at the same level (Education Trust – West 2010). With respect to English language arts proficiency, we find similar trends in AAPI achievement. Seventy-two percent of AAPIs demonstrate English language arts proficiency, but disaggregation of the data demonstrates another large disparity in achievement. Chinese (89 percent) and Korean (88 percent) students achieved a high degree of proficiency, but under the same umbrella of AAPIs, the needs of Samoan (53 percent), Tahitian (53 percent), and Laotian (57 percent) students were lost (Education Trust – West 2010). If we look at the aggregate data, we are left to believe that AAPI students are faring well, if not better than the larger population of students. However, closer examination of AAPIs unveils disparities in the

education system. As policy makers, researchers, and caretakers of America's children, we cannot afford to view children in the aggregate and must take into account the needs of each and every child.

To be sure, there is no one root cause that explains why certain AAPI groups are or are not thriving in their educational pursuits. Two major barriers have been documented to affect the AAPI community: limited English proficiency and poverty (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2012). At a national level, only 9 percent of the population speaks English less than "very well," however, 39 percent of Cambodians, 38 percent of Hmong, and 52 percent of Vietnamese adults cannot speak English "very well" (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2012). These limited English proficiency groups represent those who have settled in disproportionately impoverished neighborhoods and thus lack the resources to learn English. However, Chinese, Korean, and South Asian communities often settle in middle-class communities that have resources, and they often have knowledge of the English language prior to immigration. Lack of proper skills to communicate in English limits one's ability to do well in English-intensive courses. Moreover, research shows a correlation between AAPI students who failed their English courses and those unlikely to graduate from college (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2012).

The other major educational barrier for some AAPIs is poverty. Approximately 11 percent of American families live below the federal poverty line. Unfortunately, the state of some AAPI communities is far worse than the national average. For instance, 27 percent of Hmong, 18 percent of Cambodian, and 13 percent of Vietnamese families live below the poverty line (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2012). Additionally, 30 percent of AAPIs attend high poverty schools. Living in poverty, besides having limited financial means, presents a host of other consequences for child development, including, for example, decreased brain development and underdeveloped cognitive and social skills (Duncan and Magnuson 2011). Moreover, early childhood poverty can have a long-reaching influence on children's adult lives. For instance, a child growing up in poverty will make on average 39 percent less than the national median income (Holzer et al. 2007). These poverty consequences are further exacerbated by relegating these students to schools that are ill-equipped or ill-funded to provide the assistance that would allow children to have the same opportunities as children in low poverty areas, such as wraparound services (e.g., after-school tutoring, school psychologists, nurses, and social workers). This lack of proper wraparound services and other disparities contribute to the growing achievement gap among American children.

AMERICAN EDUCATION FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The second achievement gap between America and its economic counterparts is readily demonstrated through recent international comparisons that ranked American students around the international average score for reading, mathematics, and science. These scores ranked American children virtually indistinguishably from children in Portugal or Italy, while children in countries like Korea, Finland, and Singapore topped the charts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2010). Closer examination of these scores reveals a distinct relationship between academic achievement and race and poverty status (Hanushek and Woessman 2010; Ladd 2012). While AAPIs were lauded for scoring as well, if not better, than their peers in Asian countries, these numbers mask the academic reality of numerous AAPIs who struggle and fail to attain a proper basic education. Sadly, this situation is not endemic to AAPIs alone, but affects other students of color and those in poverty.

After accounting for the role of poverty in a country's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) score, two clear messages emerge. First, with one in five children in poverty, the United States has one of the highest child poverty rates for a First World nation (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2012). Second, poverty has a clear impact on a country's PISA score (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2012; Hanushek and Woessman 2010; Ladd 2012). When America's test scores are disaggregated by different levels of poverty, there is a clear linear relationship; lower poverty schools achieved high PISA scores, whereas high poverty schools demonstrated the poorest scores. Schools from America's most affluent areas easily score among the top countries, whereas schools in impoverished areas do worse. Poverty relegates students to underfunded, poorly staffed, and dilapidated schools that cannot offer a high-quality education.

California's 17th district, my home district, exposes this sad reality. The top-scoring schools in my district are also the schools from low poverty areas, whereas the lowest-performing schools are from impoverished areas. The students that need the most help—those from impoverished backgrounds—are the very ones who are receiving the least amount of help. To achieve high-quality education for each and every child requires a paradigm shift in the way we approach education, from providing parity in resources to addressing equity in educational opportunity for children in America.

THE COST OF EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES

Beyond a moral argument that we should properly educate each and every child, the need to address these educational disparities is a real and present

economic concern. A 2009 McKinsey & Company report analyzed the costs of the two achievement gaps that face America. It reported that the achievement gap between America and its economic counterparts costs the American economy upwards of \$2.3 trillion in lost economic output per year (McKinsey & Company 2009). Additionally, the achievement gap along racial and socioeconomic lines deprives the American economy of a financial boost upwards of \$700 billion per year (McKinsey & Company 2009). Shockingly, these persistent gaps have negatively affected the American economy more than all the recessions in the last third of the twentieth century.

If America is to remain competitive in the twenty-first century marketplace, then it needs to properly educate its children to be ready and able to enter the workforce. Granted, education is not the sole contributor to America's economic woes, but it speaks volumes that people cannot apply for jobs because of a lack of requisite skills and education. Education cannot be seen solely as an expenditure and must instead be seen as an investment in this nation's children and future.

THE VISION FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

My vision for educational equity is that each and every child receives the resources necessary to learn and thrive. As it stands now, our federal government aims to provide parity in educational funding, but parity is not equity. Each child is unique and has different needs that may make him or her more or less ready to learn compared to his or her peers. To provide parity in resources assumes that all children need the same amount of resources; whereas, equity is when each child has the resources available to make him or her ready to learn. There is no one easy solution to this problem, nor can it be solely approached from one perspective. Therefore, I propose systematic policy changes that address school funding, teacher preparation, and early education programs as a means of meeting the needs of each and every child. The decentralized nature of our nation's public education system makes it difficult to provide systemic educational reform. Thus, it becomes incumbent for the federal government to help set the agenda and provide tools that empower state and local educational agencies to provide an equitable and excellent education for all children.

SCHOOL FINANCE

American schools are woefully underfunded and inequitable in their distribution of funds. Most states have a school funding formula that provides parity in funds but not equity in funds. Often per-pupil spending is cited to demonstrate parity in funding of schools, however, as mentioned, parity does not necessarily translate to equity in education. For example, two districts may

spend the same per pupil, but one district may be largely suburban upper-middle class and not be burdened with transportation costs (i.e., buses), whereas the other district may be in an urban setting and require a significant portion of its per-pupil funding to be allocated toward transportation costs. After accounting for transportation costs, the two districts no longer spend the same in per-pupil spending for children's education. Moreover, local districts can serve vastly different communities (e.g., predominantly upper class or high poverty, English language learners), and as such they require different resources to provide equivalent educational opportunities. For example, an urban school may require more money per pupil, compared to a wealthy neighborhood school, to fund after-school tutoring, school psychologists, special education programs, and other resources that allow its students to achieve the same opportunities that the wealthy school can provide. Currently, underserved and under-resourced schools that need the funds are the very schools that do not receive the funds.

School systems are funded by local, state, and federal sources. The bulk of the money schools receive is primarily from local and state sources. School finances are extremely volatile when they are tied into property taxes. Moreover, it naturally creates a funding disparity between wealthy and poor areas. Poorer communities collect substantially lower property taxes compared to wealthy communities, and as a result, schools in these communities have less money to spend on school facilities, educational curriculum and programs, and staff. Currently, each state allocates a certain portion of its budget for public education and disburses that allocation to schools utilizing different school funding formula. These school funding formulas differ in every state and can be based on a strict dollar amount per pupil, based on weighted formulas that consider the needs of certain student populations (e.g., English language learners, special education), or myriad other methods. This current mode of funding schools is predominately based on attendance, and not on student population needs, which exacerbates and perpetuates educational inequities.

New methods of school finance that promote educational equity need to be developed to ensure that each and every child has an equal opportunity to excel. To that end, educational budgets cannot be dictated by a reaction to the economy (i.e., budget cuts), but rather must be predicated on evidence-based models. These models consider what has empirically been demonstrated to improve children's achievement and then cost out those strategies (e.g., school psychologists, after-school programs, early education) before setting budgetary constraints. Additionally, the amount of funding schools receive takes into account the student population (e.g., percent in poverty, English language learners, special education, etc.) and the types of programs they will need

to be able to succeed in the classroom. Therefore, the goal of school finance reform can no longer be parity and must be equity. It is when we have equitable distribution of funds that each and every child can have the opportunity to learn and achieve.

EARLY EDUCATION

Early education can be a valuable, influential tool that prepares children to learn. Research is unequivocal in its findings that children enrolled in high-quality early education programs reap tremendous long-term benefits (Heckman 2008; Heckman et al. n.d.; Vandell et al. 2010). Additionally, research demonstrates that early childhood is a critical time for the development of cognitive and social skills (e.g., neural development, motivation, inhibition skills) that will give children a foundation to learn in K-12 (Duncan and Magnuson 2011). High-quality early childhood programs have been demonstrated to foster the development of these cognitive and social skills (Heckman 2008). Although all children benefit from these programs, these effects are especially pronounced among children of disadvantaged backgrounds. Often children from impoverished backgrounds have working parents who are unable to foster these skills due to time constraints. As poverty can also be intergenerational, the parents themselves may lack the education to impart such skills onto their children. Early education programs can help to close the achievement gap by ensuring all children are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten.

When state and federal governments invest in these programs, there is a substantial return on investment through greater economic output, lower crime rates, and lower participation in government assistance programs. Moreover, the impact of early childhood programs increases when wraparound services are added to ensure a child's development and readiness to learn on all fronts. Therefore, policy should reflect the wealth of research regarding prekindergarten education and support the provision of high-quality early education programs for all children. U.S. President Barack Obama's 2013 State of the Union address signaled an understanding of the need to provide high-quality early childhood education for all children if we are to guarantee equal opportunity for every child to learn. If this administration enacts policies that reflect this priority, then we will begin to see long-term social and economic returns that will far outweigh the initial investment.

TEACHING, LEADING, AND LEARNING

Teachers play a central and vital role in the public education system. While there is little doubt about the passion and care teachers possess for their students, our public education system needs to improve how we equip and support our

teachers. An investment in the preparation of educators is necessary to attract and retain highly trained talent. Additionally, underserved schools need high-quality teachers who are willing to invest a career in these communities; these schools often experience a revolving door of educators coming into and out of the classroom. Methods and infrastructure need to be developed to ensure that quality teachers are evenly distributed among all schools and not concentrated in high-performing schools. For instance, decreased salary disparities between high- and low-needs schools would help to attract and retain high-quality teachers. In addition, increased local teacher autonomy to address school issues would increase the value of teachers working in these schools. Further, clinical experience should be a part of all teacher preparation programs. Research demonstrates that quality clinical preparation is strongly tied to the quality of teachers and their long-term retention in the profession. These rigorous clinical programs would also ensure that teachers are culturally competent to work with all students (e.g., English language learners, minorities, children in poverty, and students with disabilities). Systematic changes need to be implemented in order to make teaching a viable career option by promoting pathways for teacher leadership, implementing rigorous preparation and retention of teachers, and producing teachers who are committed to the communities in which they teach.

CONCLUSION

Educational equity is not just an issue for the AAPI community. It is our nation's issue, and it is humanity's issue. We know our nation has been, and continues to be, a beacon of hope and a land of opportunity for generations of Americans and for new Americans of tomorrow. Therefore, as a nation, we must seriously reconsider how we educate our children. With a changing demography, the "one size fits all" approach to public education is outdated and ineffective, overlooking the diversity of its people. Moreover, to close the two achievement gaps in America and maintain our economic competitiveness in the world economy, it is imperative that we address the needs of each and every child. This vision for educational equity will not be an easy path. There will be many hurdles to overcome as we work together to engage our family, friends, colleagues, policy makers, and communities in this dialogue. Ultimately, fighting for education equity secures America's dreams. But, more importantly, in doing so, we are fighting for the needs of each and every child.

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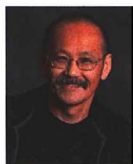
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