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The Endless Search for Silver Bullets

by Iris C. Rotberg – October 16, 2014

The controversy over the Common Core is the most recent diversion from addressing the basic problems that contribute to the achievement gap between low- and high-income students. In the past decade, the focus has been on charter schools and testing. An enormous amount of time has been spent on promoting, implementing, and debating these initiatives in the hope that they would somehow narrow the achievement gap, even while poverty persisted and income and wealth gaps increased. These policies, which began with high—perhaps, more accurately, unrealistic—expectations, turned out to be irrelevant to narrowing the gap and, in some cases, reduced rather than expanded opportunities for low-income students. This commentary describes the futility of continuing to rely on "solutions" that do not address the underlying problems, serve only to detract attention from the far more fundamental changes that are needed, and risk increasing current inequities.

In 2009, the New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project concluded: "On average, a student who attended a charter school through all of grades kindergarten through eight would close about 86 percent of the 'Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap' in math and 66 percent of the achievement gap in English" (Hoxby, Murarka, & King, 2009). The Scarsdale-Harlem gap in test scores was chosen as the frame of reference because many of New York City's charter schools are located in Harlem.

Scarsdale is one of the wealthiest communities in the United States, with a median household income of $232,422 and a median value of owner-occupied housing units estimated at $1,000,000 or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Harlem has a median household income of $36,112 (WYNC, 2014), and more than a third of the children live in poverty, with even higher poverty rates in some neighborhoods (Citizen's Committee for Children, 2012). The results of the charter school study, therefore, defied the massive amount of research conducted over the past several decades in the United States and in countries throughout the world, which has consistently shown that families' socioeconomic status is the most powerful correlate of student achievement (Reardon, 2011).

It is not surprising therefore that the study's conclusion was widely reported. Perhaps charter schools were the magic potion that would reduce poverty's impact on student achievement and, at the same time, compensate for the negative effects of an expanding gap in income and wealth, disparities in school finance, and the countless other obstacles that children face in high-poverty communities.

There were skeptics. Researchers pointed to flaws in the study's analysis, which relied on extrapolations of data from different cohorts of students that overestimated annual achievement gains and did not adequately take into account errors in the statistical models and measures (Reardon, 2009). However, these critiques were ignored by policymakers.

Four years after the study ended, the test scores dropped precipitously when a new test based on the Common Core was given in the 2012-2013 school year: An average of 34.8% of New York City's charter school students in third to eighth grade scored proficient or above in math and 25% in English language arts (ELA), a decline from 72% in math and 51.5% in ELA one year earlier (New York City Charter School Center, 2013). For students attending traditional public schools, the averages were 29.6% proficient (down from 60%) in math and 26.4% proficient (down from 46.8%) in ELA (New York City Charter School Center, 2013). The scores rose slightly in the 2013-2014 school year, as expected with increased familiarity with the test, but they remained far below the pre-Common Core levels (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Even with declines on the Common Core test, Scarsdale's scores still remained high, with an average of 68% of the students scoring proficient or above in math and 69% in ELA (Leavitt, 2013). The Scarsdale-Harlem gap continued: Charter schools were not the solution.

Moreover, the declines when the test changed demonstrated that the pressure on educators to raise students' scores was also not the silver bullet its advocates had hoped for. It had not only left the achievement gap intact, but had other adverse effects. Many of the students in high-poverty classrooms—both in charter schools and traditional public schools—had been relegated to classrooms where cramming for standardized tests was the norm and students were taught to pass a specific test rather than gain any real understanding of the material. Other subjects, as well as in-depth projects, were reduced or eliminated to make time for test preparation. It was no longer feasible to give students a broad-based education.

We know from years of experience that although cramming for standardized tests might result in short-term gains on those tests, it does not generalize to other tests, much less to an educational experience of lasting value. Although all schools were under pressure to raise test scores, the greatest narrowing of curriculum occurred in high-poverty schools

(Center on Education Policy, 2007), which rarely had course offerings equal to those of more affluent schools to begin with. The testing policies since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 increased the gap even more severely by depriving many children in high-poverty schools of the far more comprehensive educational experiences enjoyed by their affluent peers.

Educators have been caught in the middle. Many continue to give their students a meaningful education. But it is an uphill battle. If the test scores don't increase, the educators are publicly humiliated, or might lose their jobs. And the most efficient way to raise test scores, at least temporarily, is to cram for a specific test.

The supporters and opponents of the Common Core are now engaged in an escalating debate about whether the Common Core will strengthen U.S. education or, instead, become a dangerous intrusion by the federal government to control the content of the curriculum. Most likely, as in the case of previous reforms of curriculum standards, it will turn out to be irrelevant to any real change in the opportunities available to low-income students, and it is certainly unlikely to become the silver bullet that narrows the achievement gap.

It is often assumed that the Common Core's emphasis on reasoning will make it difficult to cram for and, therefore, test preparation will no longer be useful. That is the claim initially made by the College Board when cram courses were first used to prepare for university entrance exams (College Entrance Examination Board, 1965). The SAT, GRE, LSAT, and MCAT all emphasize inductive and deductive reasoning, yet affluent families figured out how to cope: They spent thousands of dollars on their children's cram courses or tutors because they saw that the preparation was effective in raising test scores. If we continue to reward and punish teachers based on the test scores of their students—even if these scores are based on Common Core tests—educators in low-income communities will continue to have little choice but to narrow the curriculum to give more time for test preparation. Rather than reducing the achievement gap, the risk is that the Common Core test, like those that preceded it, will lead to fewer opportunities for children in high-poverty communities. And the rhetoric surrounding it will continue to detract attention from the policies needed to address the societal inequities that have led to the achievement gap.

What next? We can begin by acknowledging that poverty remains the strongest correlate of low achievement and that link will not be broken by finding the "perfect" test, opening more charter schools, bypassing the public school system, or abolishing teachers unions. Many young people from high-poverty communities manage to overcome the tremendous odds stacked against them, but the basic link between poverty and achievement remains. Unfortunately, that link is increasingly reinforced by public and private policies that result in diminished opportunities for low-income students at all levels of education.

In elementary and secondary schools, the testing policies that lead to narrowing the curriculum also increase teachers' reluctance to work in high-poverty schools (Jackson, 2008; McCabe, 2008), thereby adding to existing inequalities in students' access to a high-quality education. Moreover, policies in many states and school districts contribute to large disparities in funding, which further limit the opportunities available to low-income students. At the same time schools in inner cities remain highly segregated by race, ethnicity, and income; and in some areas segregation has increased. Poverty and neighborhood segregation continue to play the major role, but other factors also make a difference. For example, segregation in a number of communities has been exacerbated by court decisions (*Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, 2007; *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 114*, 2007) that make it difficult for school districts to desegregate schools as well as by policies that encourage the rapid growth of charter schools, which often increase segregation (Rotberg, 2014a).

The higher education system, which became the vehicle for upward mobility following the GI Bill and, a decade later, the Civil Rights movement, has become increasingly polarized, with affluent students disproportionately attending selective institutions and lower-income students attending open-access 4-year colleges or community colleges (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). This trend was not an accident, but a result of policies that led to rapid increases in the cost of higher education, increases in merit aid at the expense of need-based aid, admissions policies that give preference to students who do not request financial aid, reductions in state funding, constraints on affirmative action, legacy preferences, and the continuation of requirements, like the SAT, which give enormous advantages to families that can afford cram courses and tutors (Burd, 2013; Kahlenberg, 2010; Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012; Rotberg, 2014b). The result is that low-income, high-achieving students are less likely to attend selective schools than are affluent students with comparable levels of achievement (Reardon et al., 2012). That polarization leads directly to gaps in employment opportunities and becomes yet another factor in the nation's increasing gap in income and wealth (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

It has been argued that to critique current policies is equivalent to saying that nothing can be done for low-income children. Just the opposite: we know that economic, social, and educational policies in areas of employment and wages, taxation, housing, health, school integration, school finance, and access to higher education can be effective in addressing the fundamental problems of poverty. Meanwhile, however, we can work to ensure that our current policies do not make matters worse for the most vulnerable students.

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