

# TOWN SQUARE

A PLACE TO BE HEARD

**YOUR VIEW**

## How we can all help reduce school inequities

Public officials wring their hands about inequities that arise from teaching online rather than in person. Yes, the inequities are real. But how many who now argue to reopen schools (even while the pandemic is far from over) have been just as concerned about the inequities that preceded the pandemic?

The inequities in the education system last, not for the duration of a pandemic, but for students' entire school experience, from preschool through elementary and secondary school, through college and beyond.

We can only hope that when the pandemic is over, those who now agonize about inequities linked to the pandemic will speak out about the pervasive inequities in schools and in society at large.

We can also hope that those who now fill the internet with exhortations about learning loss will express concern about the massive resource disparities across the country — and will question decisions to draw school district boundaries and attendance zones within districts specifically to segregate students.

We might question, too, whether officials who claim that learning loss is a crisis realize the pervasiveness of tracking within and among schools and the extent to which tracking disadvantages high-poverty students.

Will they address the reality that charter schools often exacerbate segregation? And will they pay attention to the sorting effects of admissions tests for selective elementary and secondary public schools and of SATs for higher education? And will they question the fairness of a system that fosters reliance



Panelists Karen Beck Pooley, from left, Jessica Lee Ortiz and Ce-Ce Gerlach participate in a community forum, Development in Allentown: A Conversation on Building a Just Community, in 2018. MORNING CALL FILE PHOTO

on cram courses and private tutoring that only affluent families can afford? We might expect those who demand that schools reopen to focus on the inequities in the broader society. These inequities — family poverty, concentrated poverty in communities and schools, and unequal access to housing, employment, and health care — fuel the education inequities.

Will those who rush to open schools to mitigate inequities also address the fact that the median wealth of Black families is one-tenth the wealth of White families, and that this wealth gap has continued to limit access to integrated housing — and integrated schools — even after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited housing discrimination?

We know that the current inequities did not happen by chance. They were the direct result of laws and public policies that often intentionally disadvantaged people of color.

Yes, positive changes have occurred but they, too, did not happen by chance. They came about because public outcry led to laws and policies that strengthened civil rights and increased access to education, to employment, and to fuller participation in the political process.

The benefits have compounded over the generations and the country is now in a far better place than it was before the changes were made.

But much more is needed. The good news is that the opportunities to make a difference through our jobs, commu-

nities and personal actions are endless.

The responsibilities for elementary, secondary and higher education are widely dispersed across different levels of government, public and private organizations, and the schools themselves. And those interested in participating can find a broad range of organizations and issues from which to choose.

Take, for example, the issues of segregation, tracking and selective schools. While the federal government and states play a role, the main decisions are typically made by local officials, influenced by community members who have considerable leverage in determining whether schools mitigate or exacerbate inequalities.

Community members also play a major role in decisions about the loca-

tion of low- and middle-income housing, a key factor in determining the long-term stability of neighborhood and school integration.

Our involvement in these issues matters. So does our involvement in the wide range of issues that affect equity in higher education.

Policies on tuition, student financial aid, loan forgiveness, admissions tests and diversity play a major role in determining which students can, or cannot, gain access to the benefits of higher education.

The Pell Grant program, for example — the largest federal grant program for undergraduate students — does not cover tuition costs even at many community colleges, at the same time that affluent families continue to gain education tax benefits from federal and state plans.

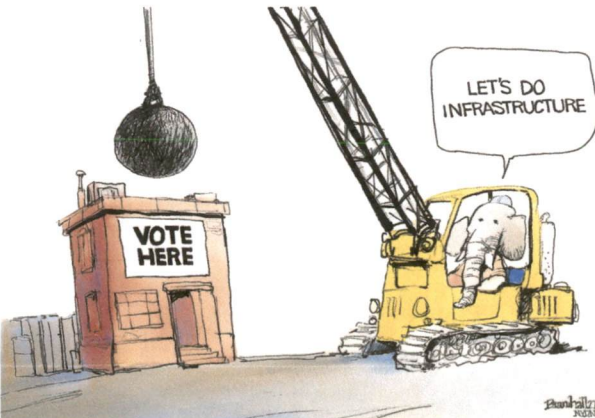
It is not surprising that students from rich families increasingly attend selective colleges and universities while those from low- and middle-income families disproportionately attend nonselective schools. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The new administration's priorities and the recent stimulus package give reason for optimism.

Let us hope that those now invoking the cause of equity in a rush to open schools recall their angst and support efforts to implement lasting and positive changes that address the education system and our society in general.

*Iris Comens Rotberg grew up in Bethlehem and lived in Allentown while she was a student at Cedar Crest College. She is a research professor of education policy at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University.*

**TOONS TO TALK ABOUT**



OPINION

# Your View: How we can all help reduce school inequities

By IRIS COMENS ROTBERG  
THE MORNING CALL  
MAR 29, 2021 AT 8:00 AM



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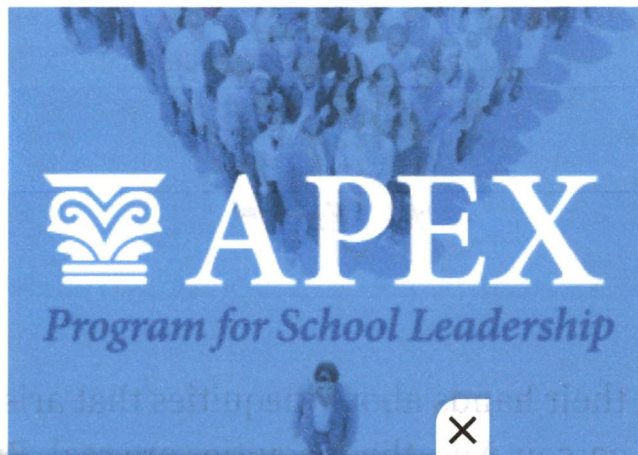




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Iris Comens Rotberg (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)





Panelists participate in a community forum, *Development in Allentown: A Conversation on Building a Just Community*, in 2018. Panelists included (from left) Karen Beck Pooley, Jessica Lee Ortiz and Ce-Ce Gerlach. (File photo)

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*Iris Comens Rotberg grew up in Bethlehem and lived in Allentown while she was a student at Cedar Crest College. She is a research professor of education policy at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University.*

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## How to think about school inequities

George Washington University professor Iris Comens Rotberg writes in her hometown newspaper in Allentown, Pennsylvania, that it's time to get serious about addressing inequities in schools and the larger society.



The pandemic revealed inequities to the larger public, she acknowledges, hoping that, "when the pandemic is over, those who now agonize about inequities linked to the pandemic will speak out about the pervasive inequities in schools and in society at large."

You can read **the whole piece** at the *The Morning Call*.

## What do we know about the effort to vaccinate children?



Experts say that in order to reach herd immunity, children will need to be vaccinated, **writes Tara Helle** for *National Geographic*.

We really haven't heard a lot about this. "Children aren't a problem" seems to be the prevailing sentiment. But, as Helle points out, "The end of the pandemic is in sight. Attaining herd immunity—the point at which transmission stops because the virus doesn't have enough susceptible hosts to infect—now feels like a real possibility. But there's a catch: The children must be vaccinated."

Experts argue that kids make up about 22 percent of the population in the U.S. Their immunity, therefore, is crucial to reaching herd immunity, estimated to require immunity among 70–90% of the national population. But even if the U.S. reached that range without children, the disease could keep spreading, they say, because what matters is not herd immunity at the national level, but at the local level.

## Hard to understand administration's decisions on waiving state tests

What is driving the U.S. Department of Education's inconsistent grants of waivers for states seeking to put off the assessment