



100% Financing Available



← OPINION | EDUCATION

May 02, 2021 - 04:00 PM EDT

# In pursuit of equity: Thurgood Marshall got it right



BY IRIS C. ROTBERG, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR

The views expressed by contributors are their own and not the view of The Hill



TWEET



SHARE



MORE

Justice Thurgood Marshall [put it this way](#): "We sit ... not to resolve disputes over

educational theory but to enforce our Constitution. ... I believe the question of education quality must be deemed to be an objective one that looks at what the state provides its children, not what the children are able to do with what they receive." The government's responsibility, therefore, is to ensure equal opportunity, not to debate its link to student achievement.

For more than 60 years, the United States inadvertently has conducted a natural experiment that examined just that issue. The experiment is a longitudinal comparison between two very different approaches to strengthening equity. The results have been unequivocal, although the comparison itself was unintended and unnoticed.

ADVERTISING



In one case, the focus was on initiatives directly designed to make the country more equitable, such as guaranteeing civil rights protections and initiating policies to increase access to social and economic benefits — education, employment, housing, health care, criminal justice and fuller participation in the political process. The point was, in Justice Marshall's words, "what the state provides its children."

Facebook  
supports updated



# internet regulations

[Learn More](#)

FACEBOOK

In the second case, the United States focused on initiatives that had no direct link to equity, but that reformers hoped would raise student test scores and reduce the achievement gap — “what the children are able to do with what they receive.”

The first approach has had a dramatic positive effect. It strengthened equity — and academic outcomes — and changed the country in ways that would have been difficult to imagine even a few decades ago. The second approach did little overall to make the country more equitable or to strengthen academic attainment.

Neither result should come as a surprise.



## Get A Free Consultation

Full Mouth Dental Implants, All on 4, or Implant Dentures. We Do It All For One Case Fee.



The focus on rights and access led to court decisions, legislation and public policies that had a direct impact on equity: [Brown v. Board of Education \(1954\)](#), the [Civil Rights Act \(1964\)](#), the [Voting Rights Act \(1965\)](#), the [Fair Housing Act \(1968\)](#), [Title IX \(1972\)](#), the [Individuals with Disabilities Act \(1975\)](#), school finance reform, increased participation of underrepresented groups in STEM fields, affirmative action — and the list continues. These initiatives did not take place in a vacuum, but were built on a long history of civil rights movements and on earlier efforts — free and compulsory education, land-grant colleges, and the [GI Bill](#) — that opened access to education for underserved economic groups and facilitated subsequent initiatives to strengthen

rights and access.

The competing approach, which began in the 1960s, has been a dominant trend in school reform for more than 60 years. It best can be described as an attempt to find a silver bullet, a magical potion that would increase student achievement and equity.

These “reforms” typically have been in response to perceived national crises — in science and mathematics education after the launch of [Sputnik](#) in 1957, in rankings on international test-score comparisons starting in the 1960s, and in international competitiveness, first with Japan and now with China. Regardless of the perceived crisis, the reforms focused largely on raising scores on standardized tests and reducing the test-score gap between low-income and more affluent students.

This objective was to be accomplished by “fixing” the education system and rewarding or punishing teachers for students’ test scores. Other social and economic considerations were largely ignored, as was any link between the reforms selected and their relevance to equity.

## MSc Psychology no GRE

Online study program, 1 year

Online Study Programs, 100% online, only  
1 year, Psychology Masters



[academic-institute.com](https://academic-institute.com)

Three main reforms have dominated the education system and education policy research: charter schools as an alternative to traditional public schools; holding teachers accountable for student performance; and curriculum standards to guide instruction. The results show little evidence that the reforms led to a more equitable society or to national gains in [student achievement](#). Indeed, there were negative effects in some school districts — for example, increased [segregation](#) linked to charter schools and a narrowing of curriculum to focus on the tested material, particularly in low-income communities that bore the brunt of the reforms.



The two approaches to strengthen equity also used very different measures of effectiveness. The “silver bullet” initiatives relied largely on student test scores as an outcome measure. In contrast, initiatives that focused on rights and access assessed whether laws and policies had strengthened equity for the country’s diverse populations — a clearly measurable outcome that showed positive results.

[Is the US headed toward a new housing bubble?](#)

[Fauci vs. Rogan: White House works to stomp out misinformation](#)

At times, however, these educational and social initiatives were also evaluated by student test scores. The large literature on whether money matters in education is a prime example. Even health and social programs were sometimes evaluated by test results, as if a trip to the doctor was justified only if it had an immediate effect on a child’s mathematics score. In the longer run, however — and compounded over generations — the initiatives directly related to equity resulted in major gains in academic attainment as well as a wide range of other societal benefits.

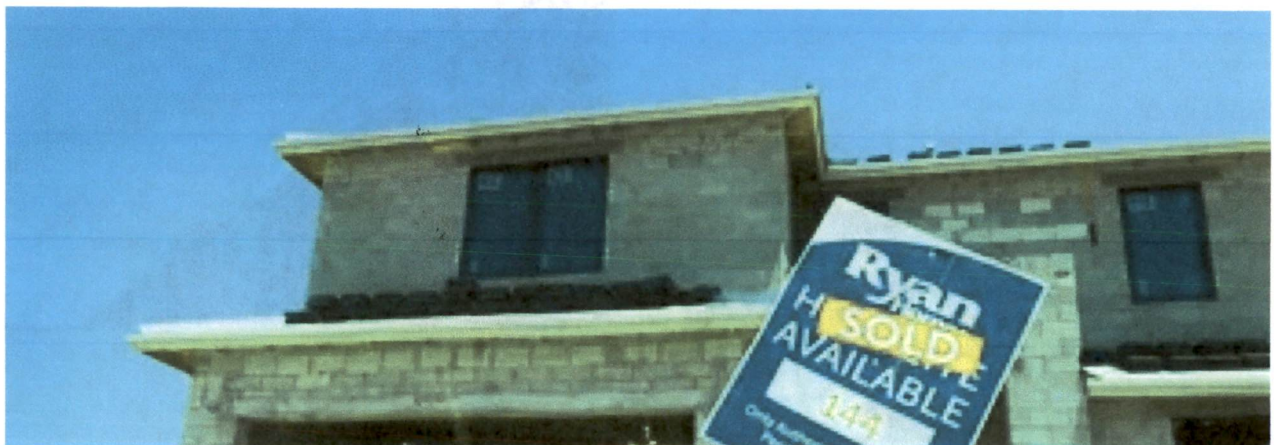
But we have just begun. There is little doubt about the optimum approach as we move forward.

*Iris C. Rotberg is a research professor of education policy at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University.*

[Load Text Comments](#)

[Load Video Comments](#)

## Most Popular







## Is the US headed toward a new housing bubble?



## Cindy McCain: Arizona election audit is 'ludicrous'

