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COMMENTARY

Reacting to *The Bell Curve*

The Bell Curve makes the following argument: We have focused our national resources on low-income and minority students through such programs as Title I and Head Start. These programs have not solved our educational problems. We should, therefore, reduce federal aid to low-income schools and redirect the funds to other priorities.

The argument is one of many myths set forth in *The Bell Curve*. It both seriously misrepresents the allocation of education resources among rich and poor schools in the United States and ignores the significant achievement gains that have been made.

Yes, the playing field is uneven, but in precisely the opposite direction from the one described in *The Bell Curve*. As a nation, we devote the fewest resources to the most impoverished schools. It is not uncommon for per-pupil expenditures in affluent schools to be two to three times higher than in low-income schools. We are consistent in one respect: Children from families with the lowest incomes attend the most poorly funded schools.

Title I, while providing badly needed resources, does not make a dent in the per-pupil expenditure difference. This is because Title I represents only 3 percent of total funding for elementary and secondary education, and even these funds are widely dispersed to both rich and poor communities alike. Almost half of the elementary schools in the country with fewer than 10 percent poor children receive Title I funds.

Yet, *The Bell Curve* perpetuates the fiction that we have thrown money at "disadvantaged" students. It leaves the reader with the impression that low-income and minority students receive, because of perceived federal largess, more education resources than do affluent children. The fact is we have so skewed our public resources away from impoverished communities that we should question not why our minimal federal contribution has been unable to solve all our problems, but why so many low-income and minority students have somehow managed to overcome the substantially lower resources spent on their education.

Despite the financial disparities, minority populations have made extraordinary gains in less than two generations. In 1950, fewer than one in four blacks 25 to 29 years old had completed high school, and less than 3 percent had completed four years of college. By 1993, the high-school-graduation rate was close to 83 percent, and the college-graduation rate had risen to more than 13 percent. These educational gains are reflected in increased participation in professional, business, and political activity and in consistently increased test scores.

If we further reduce our investment in low-income schools, as *The Bell Curve* recommends, we create yet another financial barrier to continued gains for low-income and minority students.

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