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Separate And Unequal

By Iris C. Rotberg

We are all familiar with the conventional wisdom: U.S. international competitiveness has declined because our young people lack workplace skills. The solution: Provide these youngsters with a demanding curriculum, increase job training, and require tough tests. The result: We will improve our schools, produce a well-trained workforce, and, at the same time, revive failing industries.

The argument contains two unfounded premises: first, that declines in U.S. international competitiveness result from a poorly trained workforce and, second, that we can address the most critical problem in U.S. education—the lack of adequate resources for schools in poor communities—by tinkering with testing, or vouchers, or job training. Public policies based on these premises will do little either to strengthen our industries or our schools.

The fact is that our current problems in industrial competitiveness do not result from defects in the education system. Nor is there reliable evidence that decent jobs go unfilled because of a lack of trained applicants. As a nation, we produce a highly educated workforce—there is no lack of extraordinary scientists, engineers, and technicians. By any measure—test scores, high school graduation rates, the number of students taking Advanced Placement tests, college attendance and graduation rates, productivity in basic and applied research—our students' accomplishments equal and in many cases surpass those of students in previous years.

It is counterproductive to lay at the door of the education establishment problems in international competitiveness that are caused by quite extraneous factors: the realities of the global economy, business practices, and government policies—for example, exchange rates, the lack of incentives for industry to invest in long-term product development, the financial incentives that lead to off-shore manufacturing, differential wage rates among countries, differential profit margins and governmental subsidies among countries, and licensing practices. Often the problem is simply the organization of the workplace, as found in a recent study by McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm, which also concluded that a shortage of skilled workers was not the problem.

While the quality of U.S. education has not declined, it has always been—and remains—highly unequal. Rhetoric about competitiveness masks the fundamental problem: a system of school finance that allocates the fewest resources to the most impoverished communities. This skewed allocation of resources away from those most in need, in turn, insures that many young people from low-income families will continue to be shut out of the economy, with obvious deleterious family and social consequences. We insist on a level playing field in trade and business competition, but ignore the inequalities in our children's schools.

While increased funding for education clearly cannot by itself solve the systemic problems associated with poverty, it is a sine qua non for placing low-income children on a more equal footing with their more advantaged

peers. Schools in our poorest communities cannot deliver a decent education if they do not have the resources to do a job.

The fact is that the amount spent on the education of children in affluent schools is often two to three times higher than in low-income schools. For example, the 100 poorest districts in Texas spend an average of about \$3,000 per student, while the 100 wealthiest districts spend an average of about \$7,200. Illinois school districts spend between \$2,400 and \$8,300 per student.

The conditions in poor schools—overcrowded classrooms, inexperienced teachers, shortages of counselors, science laboratories that lack even rudimentary equipment, obsolete instructional materials, decaying facilities—will continue to block the attending children from participation in the economy. And they are denied that chance for their lifetimes. Marginal increments in funding will leave the problem and its inevitable consequences essentially unchanged. So will pronouncements about international competitiveness, job training, and national testing.

If we want to make a difference, we will have to increase substantially the resources in poor schools and address the large disparities in per-pupil expenditures between rich and poor districts. This year Congress and the Clinton Administration have an excellent opportunity to set a foundation for the needed fiscal reforms in reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. As currently designed, Chapter 1 compensatory education, the largest program under the act, cannot provide fundamental improvements in low-income schools because the total funding is insufficient and the money is widely dispersed—a result of the political decision to spread the federal money to virtually every Congressional district. Indeed, Chapter 1 funds go to almost half of the elementary schools in the country with as few as 10 percent poor children.

Further, because school expenditures vary tremendously among states, districts in a state, and schools in a district, less money is devoted to the education of many Chapter 1 participants (even after the addition of Chapter 1 funds) than is devoted to the education of other children across the nation. Substantial increases in both the level and concentration of Chapter 1 resources are needed if we hope to make a real difference in the quality of education available to low-income children nationwide.

The increase in Chapter 1 to our poorest communities also should be accompanied by a new program aimed at encouraging school-finance equalization across school districts by providing incentives for equalizing expenditures within states.

If we let the extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act slip away this year without making real change, we are unlikely to have another chance until 2000,



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when the act next comes up for reauthorization. By that time, an entire group of low-income children who began kindergarten this school year will have completed their elementary school educations in schools with such serious funding shortfalls that they can barely provide even minimal educational services. Government policies that direct real resources to these schools would be far more effective than programs that may appear to provide a quick fix but are unlikely to address the endemic problems. Stopgap "solutions"—whether they are a few additional job-training programs for high school students, private takeovers of public schools, or increased testing—will do little to alleviate the underlying problem of inadequate resources in poor communities. If money doesn't matter, surely the affluent school districts haven't heard the message. ■

Iris C. Rotberg is a program director with the National Science Foundation. She recently directed a study at the RAND Corporation of federal policy options for improving the education of low-income students. The study was designed to provide information for Congressional deliberations on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The views expressed are her own and do not necessarily reflect positions and policies of the N.S.F.