It has been a difficult year for public education. A five-years’ overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, whose 2002 version we call No Child Left Behind (NCLB), languishes in a divided Congress. Now Secretary of Education Arne Duncan says he will grant states unilateral waivers from the law’s most punitive consequences, but the catch is that to qualify, states must present accountability plans based on Duncan’s own favorite punishments for schools unable quickly to raise scores—including sanctions like merit pay and reduction of due process for teachers, school closure, and rapid charterization. The rhetoric of school reform has little to do with the lives of children or the daily work of teachers. Meanwhile a deplorable wave of scapegoating school teachers continues unabated.

The damage of NCLB accrues. Reviewing twenty years of test-based accountability, including these last ten years under NCLB, the National Research Council recently declared the experiment a failure: “Test-based incentive programs… have not increased student achievement enough to bring the United States close to the levels of the highest achieving countries.” Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Philadelphia, and a growing list of school districts are reeling from investigations of widespread cheating by educators under intense pressure to raise scores at any cost or lose their jobs. With state budgets still lagging from the 2008 recession and the federal government cutting services in our increasingly tax-averse nation, local school districts face the bleak political prospect of trying to make up the difference by asking voters for additional local taxes at a time when NCLB’s label, “failing,” is undermining confidence.

No Child Left Behind “was not designed around real educational experience, nor does it utilize what research has shown about the sources of educational inequality,” writes longtime civil rights advocate, Gary Orfield. “Instead, NCLB is based on the dual assumptions that children are falling behind very largely because educators don’t care enough and that deadlines and strong sanctions imposed by the federal government can cure the problem so that all subgroups of children will become proficient by 2014.”

“One of the disturbing things… is how frequently one encounters the idea that what we have now is so bad, the bureaucracy is so terrible, that just about anything would be better,” worries University of Chicago sociologist Charles Payne. “Any idea that can present itself as Bold!!, Visionary!!, Revolutionary!!—that is, as different from what we have—can get taken seriously. In Washington, Detroit, and New Orleans, that means a flight to charter schools. Elsewhere, it means a push to close old schools and reopen them as new…. All the bright shiny ideas can actually become ways to avoid thinking about the hard questions of instruction, of human and social capital, of school culture.”

Half a century ago, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith coined the term, the conventional wisdom, to describe “the ideas which are esteemed at any time for their acceptability.” Test-based accountability is today’s conventional wisdom for school reform. Despite decades of research documenting the need to address school inequity and the conditions of childhood poverty, the media and leaders in both political parties continue to find accountability-based, test-and-punish reform the acceptable conventional strategy. Galbraith wrote, “Because economic and social phenomena are so forbidding, or at least so seem… within a considerable range (the individual)…. may hold whatever view of this world he finds most agreeable…” “The conventional wisdom is not the...
Property of any political group…. the consensus is exceedingly broad. Nothing much divides those who are liberals by common political designation from those who are conservatives.”

**How Did Test-Based Accountability Come to Be Today’s Conventional Wisdom on School Reform?**

Political leaders in both major parties today relentlessly pursue school reform dominated by a business-accountability strategy that is also embedded in the language, philosophy, and operation of NCLB. Such accountability systems pressure schools with an official set of academic standards to define what all children should know at every grade; classroom materials and texts coordinated with the standards; standardized tests to measure whether children have learned what the standards prescribe; and sanctions to pressure educators to bring every child to standard.7 In 1989, President George H.W. Bush launched a movement based on standards, assessments, and accountability by convening an education summit of the nation’s governors, chaired by Bill Clinton of Arkansas, to agree on national education goals. Throughout the 1990s, many governors implemented standards-based reform in their own states. Then in 2001, when Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, with a new name, “No Child Left Behind,” the federal government mandated its own accountability reforms on top of accountability rules already being tried in particular states.

After President Obama took office in 2009, the U.S. Department of Education pursued the same philosophy by making a portion of the huge federal stimulus funding, intended to shore up the economy after the 2008 economic crisis, available to states for school reform. These programs required states to compete for billions of dollars through Race to the Top, Innovation Grants, and School Improvement Grants, but strings were attached. To qualify, states had to agree to adopt additional standards-based reforms prescribed by the U.S. Department of Education. States earned points if their legislatures changed laws to tie teacher evaluation and pay to students’ test scores; if their legislatures rewrote laws to permit rapid growth in the number of charter schools; and if they promised to implement specified models for school “turnaround”—plans that included firing the principal and half the staff in so-called “failing” schools without hearings or individual evaluations, closing low scoring schools and moving the students elsewhere, turning over low-scoring schools to charter operators or education management companies, or replacing the principal and some staff along with governance and instructional reform.

The standards movement has become the conventional wisdom of both political parties and all the recent Administrations—Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama. Standards-based accountability trumpets the values of the marketplace—school districts incentivized to manage a portfolio of schools that are opened or closed depending on their test scores—states competing for funding—teachers incentivized by merit pay for production of higher test scores—management efficiency valued over democratic governance. Much of today’s policy derives from the orthodoxy that schools struggle because they are unaccountable for mismanagement. Even the right of all children to high quality public education is sometimes quietly redefined as the right of parents to school choice in a marketplace of options. School-by-school innovation in a competitive choice marketplace is idealized, while we seem to have forgotten that the promise of public education has always been its systemic accessibility, availability and appropriateness for a mass of children with a range of needs. We have come to value the test scores we can measure and to distrust the judgment of teachers who are said to be biased, too responsive to the personal issues of children, too prone to the soft values of nurturing and sparking curiosity. We now talk about schools as an enterprise.

**There Are Voices Challenging the Conventional Wisdom**

There are dissenters, however, with the churches articulating a more humane and compassionate vision. A central biblical grounding for our Christian understanding of justice is the Great Commandment. Jesus answers the question, “What commandment is the greatest?” by replying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 37-40).

While many people understand the Great Commandment as though it speaks primarily to the personal relations among people, we know that faith also speaks to public morality and the ways a nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life. Here is how Rev. Philip Wogaman interprets the commandment to love God and love the neighbor: “…justice is the community’s guarantee of the conditions necessary for everybody to be a participant in the common life of society… If we are, finally, brothers and sisters through the providence of God, then it
is just to structure institutions and laws in such a way that communal life is enhanced and individuals are provided full opportunity for participation.\textsuperscript{8}

General Synod has grounded our work in the United Church of Christ to address the connection of long-standing economic and racial injustice and limited educational opportunity. General Synod 18 pronounced, “We act now virtually at the eleventh hour, for the public schools have come increasingly to reflect the ethnic, racial and economic inequities of our country. We as Americans live in a two-tier society…. More and more of our city schools, forced to rely on a shrinking and aging tax base for local support, find themselves unable to offer education of the quality to be found in suburban schools, schools which are often only a few miles away geographically but light years away in their educational opportunities.”\textsuperscript{9}

General Synod 25 spoke to our responsibility as faithful citizens to protect the democratic process and “the role of government for providing public services on behalf of the community.” The “Resolution for the Common Good” declared that individuals’ private choices massed together will neither protect the vulnerable nor provide the safeguards and services needed by the whole population. Naming opportunity for every child in well-funded, high quality public schools and quality pre-kindergarten experiences for children as essential for the common good, the resolution reaffirmed “the obligation of citizens to share through taxes the financial responsibility for public services that benefit all citizens, especially those who are vulnerable, (and) to work for more equitable public institutions.”\textsuperscript{10}

Not only the United Church of Christ but also the ecumenical community has deplored racial and economic inequality as causes of school achievement gaps. In 1999, the National Council of Churches General Assembly spoke: “At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, and when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, we know that public schools cannot be improved by concentrating on public schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America.”\textsuperscript{11} The NCC has also affirmed public education as a basic right for all children: “As a people called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we look for the optimal way to balance the needs of each particular child and family with the need to create a system that secures the rights and addresses the needs of all children.”\textsuperscript{12}

The churches have also questioned the idea of managing schools as a business portfolio—closing and opening schools according to test scores without attention to the role public schools serve as anchors of community and without attention to the need for stability in the lives of children in poor communities. The churches have protested mass firing of teachers and attacks on collective bargaining. The churches have deplored the idolatry of worshiping only what is countable.\textsuperscript{13} “We worry that our society has come to view what is good as what can be measured and compared… As people of faith we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated,” declared the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches in a 2010 pastoral letter delivered to the President and Congress.\textsuperscript{14}

The civil rights community has challenged the conventional wisdom by reminding Congress and the Administration that federal funding should be allocated by fair formulas that serve the rights of every child, not through state-by-state or district-by-district competitions: “The right to a high quality education is connected to the civil rights community has also raised questions from the point of view of the communities most negatively affected by corporatized school reform: “Rather than addressing inequitable access to research-proven methodologies like high quality early childhood education and a stable supply of experienced, highly effective teachers, recent education reform proposals have favored ‘stop gap’ quick fixes that may look new on the surface but offer no real long-term strategy for effective systemic change. The absence of these ‘stop gap’ programs in affluent communities speaks to the marginal nature of this approach.”\textsuperscript{15} The civil rights community has also raised questions about the market-driven charterization of schools: “…we are concerned about the overrepresentation of charter schools in low-income and predominantly minority communities. There is no evidence that charter operators are systematically more effective in creating higher student outcomes….There must also be safeguards to ensure that charter schools do not promote education-driven gentrification through the disproportionate exclusion of students with the greatest needs.”\textsuperscript{16}

Raising the alarm about damage to communities caused by school closure, one of the so-called “turnaround” models being pushed by the U.S. Department of Education, and a practice that has become common in the poorest
neighborhoods in New York City, Chicago and other cities, the civil rights community has warned: “Because public schools are critical community institutions especially in urban and rural areas, they should be closed only as a measure of last resort… Efforts to close schools and reconstitute staff in urban and rural communities over the last decade have…. increased disruption but have not improved achievement for the students…. And in some communities, the new schools created do not admit or retain the most educationally needy students.” 18 “The civil rights community’s recent outcry echoes a concern best articulated by sociologist Pedro Noguera, who calls public schools “the indispensable institution.” “In economically depressed inner-city communities… public schools play a vital role…. Even when other neighborhood services, including banks, retail stores, libraries, and other public services do not exist, are shut down, or are abandoned, public schools remain… Urban public schools frequently serve as important social welfare institutions… They do so because those charged with educating poor children generally recognize that it is impossible to serve their academic needs without simultaneously addressing their basic need for health and safety. For many poor children, schools provide a source of stability that often is lacking in other parts of their lives and … most are far safer than they communities in which they are located.” 19

Through 2011, voices have grown louder to challenge the “business reform” conventional wisdom and to insist that public schools must be valued as community, not marketplace, institutions. The Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, a campaign representing many academic, civil rights, and national leaders, condemns efficiency-driven school reform: “The prevalent but fundamentally flawed narrative around “fixing” troubled schools goes something like this: ‘Low student test scores tell us which schools are underperforming. These schools fail because of weak leadership, low expectations among teachers, and inefficient use of resources. The only way to fix these schools is to ‘transform’ them by bringing in new teachers and leaders, or should that fail, close them down.’ Hewing to this faulty narrative, so-called turnaround efforts—as codified in federal Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind legislation—have failed to produce the promised gains for students and schools.” 20

Prominent educators are themselves pushing back, including Massachusetts Education Secretary Paul Reville: “Some want to make the absurd argument that the reason low-income youngsters do poorly is that, mysteriously, all the incompetency in our education systems has coincidentally aggregated around low income students. In this view, all we need to do is scrub the system of incompetency and all will be well… Others want to banish any discussion of socio-economic status (SES) and educational performance for fear that it suggests that SES is destiny… All of these arguments typically get lumped together with the dismissive comment that considering the out of school factors is ‘making excuses’ for students and schools….” 21

Education historian Diane Ravitch has become the most incisive and dedicated critic of the school reform conventional wisdom: “Growing evidence and growing resistance by teachers and parents, by administrators and school boards, will eventually make it possible to break through the media shield that protects corporate reform. In time, the general public will understand the full dimensions of this… effort to reduce public space and to hand more of the nation’s children over to the private sector.” 22

What Does Research Say About Causes of School Achievement Gaps?

For fifty years, social science research has identified definitively the challenges our society needs to address—opportunity gaps created by family poverty, racial isolation, and gaping inequity in the amount of public resources society invests in the schools of poor and more privileged children.

In 1966, Johns Hopkins sociologist, James S. Coleman documented the most powerful factors affecting student achievement: the socio-economic background of children’s families and the concentration of poverty in particular communities. 23 Researchers have continued to test Coleman’s conclusions only to confirm again and again that children isolated by poverty struggle to achieve at school.

Just two years later in 1968, a government task force known as The Kerner Commission examined the causes of summer riots in American cities in 1967: “To continue present policies is to make permanent the division of our country into two societies; one, largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities; the other, predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs and in outlying areas.” 24 Unlike today’s conversation that blames teachers in poor, largely central city schools, the Kerner Commission directed its criticism to society’s blindness: “Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White
institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” To improve the lives of all Americans, not merely the lives of families in central cities, the Commission recommended school desegregation, equity of school resources, early childhood education for every “disadvantaged” child, support for adult education, and tuition support for higher education along with massive support for child welfare, healthcare, job creation and affordable housing fairly available to all.26

Just prior to the passage of NCLB, the National Research Council lamented: “Achieving the goal of breaking the nexus between family background and student achievement requires special attention…” 27 Rutgers professor, Jean Anyon has declared, “A better K-12 education does not increase a child’s life chances when there is no decent job the diploma will attract, and no funding that will stay with the graduate through a college degree… This means we need to reconsider what counts as educational policy…. Because of macroeconomic policies… education is no longer the reliable social ‘leveler’ that it once was for individuals and groups who used high school or college to move from urban ghettos to the middle class.”28

High Child Poverty in U.S. Is A Primary Cause of Achievement Gaps

Today over 15 million children in the United States, nearly 21 percent of all American children, live in poverty.29 According to Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond, “The United States not only has the highest poverty rates for children among industrialized nations, but it also provides fewer social supports for their well-being and fewer resources for them at school.”30

Poverty rates among children vary significantly across racial-ethnic groups. Although only 11.9 percent of white children are poor, 35.7 percent of Black children and 33.1 percent of Hispanic children live in poverty. Over a quarter of poor children live in central cities, and 44.3 percent live in female headed families,31 where the median family income is only $23,313.32 More than half of our nation’s poor children reside in just eight states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Georgia, and Michigan.33 In Mississippi 31 percent of all children live in poverty, with 29.4 percent of all children in the nation’s capital living in poverty.34

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, the Orwellian name for welfare reform, set a strict federal five-year, lifetime limit on cash assistance; some states have established even shorter lifetime limits.35 Congress replaced Aid for Families with Dependent Children, a program aimed at providing a floor below which children could not fall, with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a program designed to inspire a work ethic in parents. The writer, Jonathan Kozol criticized the law’s intent: “When Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘If you love me, feed my sheep,’ he didn’t say, ‘only the sheep whose fathers have good jobs and mothers come to PTA.’ He didn’t say, ‘only the sheep whose parents make smart choices.’… He just said, ‘If you love me, feed my sheep.’”36 Welfare reform has left far too many children living in poverty while punishing their parents.

Today 40 percent of the families receiving short term federal help are receiving support only for the children, primarily for disabled children or children being raised by relatives.37 Social programs lift fewer from poverty than similar programs in other nations. While Canada reduces poverty by 54 percent, Britain by 61 percent, and Sweden by 78 percent, in the United States, social programs reduce poverty overall by only 28 percent.38

Although poor families with children qualify for support from the Earned Income Tax Credit, too many of these families are living with alarmingly meager resources. Defining extreme poverty as half or less of the federally defined poverty level of approximately $22,000 for a family of four, the Southern Education Foundation reports that in 2008, 5.7 million children lived in extreme poverty in the United States. Nearly half of these children reside in the South, though deep poverty is widespread, with 9 percent of children in New York, Ohio, Arizona, and Michigan and more than 8 percent in Missouri and Indiana living in extreme poverty. One of every five children in the Bronx lives at less than 50 percent of the federal poverty level.39

Jean Anyon points to the staggering “percentage of people who work full-time, year-round yet are poor.” She documents that at the height of the 2000 economic boom, 19.5 percent of men and 33.1 percent of women worked full-time, year-around and yet earned only poverty-level wages.40 “Worsening income distribution,” writes Eugene Robinson, the Washington Post reporter, “has been accompanied by a decline in economic and social mobility, once our nation’s great pride and still a cherished element of the American dream. To be born poor and rise to wealth is now a much more difficult and less common feat in the United States than it was forty or fifty years ago, when industries such as automobile and steel factories provided a path into the middle class and working-class families could easily afford public higher education for their children.”41 Economist Paul Krugman reports that social mobility is lower in the United States today than in France, Canada, Britain, and the Scandinavian countries.42
Contrary to what many believe, public schools have been re-segregating racially since 1988. The effect of rigidifying racial separation is compounded by growing economic segregation in America’s metropolitan areas. For public schools, one Supreme Court decision, Milliken v. Bradley in 1974, closed the door on cross district busing for racial integration. Milliken, writes legal scholar James Ryan, is the decision most determinative of the way we live now in America’s cities and suburbs: “As long as suburban students are safely ensconced in their own districts, suburban parents and their political representatives have much less reason to care about urban schools—whether the issue is funding levels, access to good teachers, safety, or overall educational quality. If anything, their incentive is to limit state funding of urban schools in order to keep state taxes from rising...Milliken precluded the formation of ties—physical, financial, and political—that might have bound urban and suburban schools, students, and parents together.”

In recent decades immigrant children have been added to those segregated in America’s poorest schools. Between 1995 and 2005, the nation’s population of English Language Learners in public primary and secondary schools grew by 57 percent; twenty percent of children in U.S. public schools today are Hispanic. “Given the racial complexity of the region’s students, we examined segregation in several different ways,” reports the Civil Rights Project in a new study of public schools in the Los Angeles region. “Yet all measures pointed to a basic fact: Southern California’s students were extremely stratified in schools across the six counties. In 2008, more than two out of five Latino students and nearly one-third of all black students in the region enrolled in intensely segregated learning environments—schools where 90-100% of students were from underrepresented minority backgrounds. Just 5% of Southern California’s Asian students attended intensely segregated minority schools, and 2% of the region’s white students did the same.”

In America’s central cities hyper-segregation by race and ethnicity as well as economics creates conditions that challenge public schools. In a twenty-year longitudinal study, the Consortium on Chicago School Research identified 46 “truly disadvantaged” public schools in the city of Chicago. These schools are far poorer than the norm in a city where many public schools serve a relatively large number of children living in impoverished circumstances. The 46 “truly disadvantaged” schools serve families and neighborhoods where the median family income is $9,480. They are racially segregated, each serving 99 percent African American children, and they serve on average 96 percent poor children, with virtually no middle class children present. The report notes that 25 percent of children in foster care in Chicago are concentrated within 27 elementary schools representing only 5 percent of the system. “In the average Chicago public school, about 15 percent of students had been substantiated by the Department of Children and Family Services as being abused or neglected, either currently or during some earlier point in their elementary career. In the truly disadvantaged schools, this number swells to almost 25 percent of the students enrolled. This means that in a typical classroom of 30... a teacher might be expected to engage 7 or 8 such students every year.”

The Chicago researchers explain: “...the job of school improvement appears especially demanding in truly disadvantaged urban communities where collective efficacy and church participation may be relatively low, residents have few social contacts outside their neighborhood, and crime rates are high. It can be equally demanding in schools with relatively high proportions of students living under exceptional circumstances, where the collective human need can easily overwhelm even the strongest of spirits and the best of intentions. Under these extreme conditions, sustaining the necessary efforts to push a school forward on a positive trajectory of change may prove daunting indeed.”

Sociologists describe social capital, a measure of the value contributed by the relationships individuals have with others. Children benefit from at least two kinds of social capital: bonding social capital, the density of supportive social ties and solidarity within a neighborhood or community; and bridging social capital, the opportunities individuals in a particular community have to engage with individuals and organizations in the world outside the neighborhood or community. Sociologist Noguera speculates that communities in which poverty is extremely concentrated and bridging social capital highly limited “are less likely to produce lasting improvements in public schools... In such places the array of social and economic hardships besetting the community are so vast, and the availability of resources so limited, that outside assistance will be needed if change is to be made.”

How Does Poverty Affect School Attainment?

Noting that issues like the availability of affordable housing, the location and accessibility of jobs, and the state of any regional economy directly impact the capacity of a community’s public schools, Noguera describes his work with the public schools in Oakland, California,
where, “all of the schools that… have been designated ‘low performing,’ serve student populations where over 90% of the children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Additionally, more than a third of the district’s students are from families that recently immigrated to the United States and whose first language is not English. The school district is also responsible for providing adequate educational opportunities for these students, who speak over 70 different languages,” “At Lowell Middle School in west Oakland where I conducted research… over 40% of the students suffered from some form of chronic respiratory condition, and two-thirds of all students lived in a household with someone other than a biological parent.”

Educators are frequently accused of using poverty as an excuse to let them off the hook for low test scores. Noguera disagrees: “…the simple fact is that the schools cannot serve the needs of Oakland’s poorest children without greater support. Other public agencies must provide additional resources and services to address the health, welfare, and safety needs of students so that the schools can concentrate their attention on serving their educational needs.”

Harvard Graduate School of Education lecturer, Richard Weissbourd describes the “quiet” and often unnoticed challenges to academic success faced by low-income children: “Hunger, dehydration, asthma, obesity, and hearing problems can all insidiously trip children up in school. Some quiet problems are psychological—depression, anxiety, the fear of utter destitution… Certain quiet problems are especially pervasive and concerning. One is caretaking responsibility, such as having to take care of a depressed or sick parent or look after younger siblings.”

Children most in need of enriched pre-school are likely to lack access to these services. While Head Start is a model program, Head Start serves far fewer children than qualify economically, and the program’s funding continues to be threatened in federal budget proposals. Linda Darling-Hammond writes: “A growing body of research suggests that learning opportunities before children enter school…substantially predict their success or failure. However, many children do not have the kinds of experiences at home or in a preschool setting that enable them to develop the communication and interaction skills, motor development, cognitive skills, and social-emotional skills that enable them to be independent learners when they arrive in school. This undermines their academic success…. An estimated 30 to 40% of children enter kindergarten without the social and emotional skills and language experiences needed to be initially successful in school.”

The Economic Policy Institute’s Richard Rothstein describes the problems for children whose families move frequently: “The growing unaffordability of adequate housing also affects achievement. Urban rents have risen faster than working class incomes; low-income families are more likely to move when they fall behind in rent payments. In some urban schools, this boosts mobility rates to over 100 percent.”

In very poor communities many children miss too much school. The New York City Schools have been attempting to address chronic absenteeism since the New School Center for New York City Affairs reported in 2008 that in 12 of New York City’s 32 school districts more than 25 percent of elementary school children missed more than 10 percent of the school year, while in 123 individual elementary schools 30 percent of the children were chronically absent. “Strong research has found that chronic absenteeism among primary school children is often associated with poverty, teenage motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, welfare, maternal unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health, and multiple siblings.”

Perhaps the most profound impact on education is when children, isolated from paths to opportunity by poverty, unemployment, and racial segregation, become disengaged. The writer, educator, and videographer Gregory Michie describes what happens when adolescents lose hope: “The same kids who portray gangbangers in our videos are sometimes playing the roles for real a short time later… This shouldn’t be terribly surprising. And it certainly doesn’t mean that our efforts have been in vain, or that kids who become gang members are too dumb to see the writing on the wall. In many cases, they are too intelligent and aware not to see it. As they grow into their teens, many gradually come to the realization that for them, the so-called American Dream is… a fable. As kids come to internalize this, and feel their options narrowing, the gang culture around them looms larger and larger. So when they finally join, it is not so much a choice as a surrender, an acknowledgment that, in their eyes there are no other choices left.”

### Inequality in School Resources Compounds Inequality of Family Resources

“Despite the enormity of the deprivations suffered by children in poverty and the magnitude of their learning needs,” writes school finance litigator and expert Michael Rebell, “in the United States, schools by and large not
only fail to provide the high-quality resources children need to overcome the burdens of poverty, but they actually provide these children with fewer resources and lower-quality services than they provide to more advantaged children...”

In the past thirty years, lawsuits in 45 of the states have pressed for greater and more equitable school investment. Rebell continues: “Although defendants in these cases often claimed that ‘money doesn’t matter’ in rectifying educational inadequacies, the courts in 30 of the state cases considered this question... In 29 of the 30 cases, the courts held that money does matter and that additional resources are needed to provide meaningful educational opportunities to poor and minority children.”

Despite the lawsuits, however, and the improved funding they have brought, the disparity in investment between high and low spending school districts remains 3:1 in most states. “Courts often have trouble fashioning useful remedies, and have little authority to ensure implementation when they do call for a change. Legislatures often resist raising taxes or revising funding formulas, and may try to wait out the court...”

So, even when school funding schemes are declared unconstitutional, it can take decades of ongoing litigation to get a major reallocation of resources.”

According to the Education Law Center, “Over the past 20 years, all 50 states adopted higher academic goals for students and schools. However, the states did not align school resources with the learning goals, creating enormous opportunity gaps.”

Although students in New York must pass a lab science class to graduate from high school, 31 high schools in New York City lack science labs. In California not all high schools offer all the classes required for application to the University of California system. Our society has been unwilling to pay for school reform at scale. “Most of the measures that have been shown to benefit low-achieving students are costly to offer...” writes Chicago sociologist, Kathryn Neckerman. “They include smaller classes, a longer school day, summer school, more extensive and higher-quality preschool, and one-on-one tutoring...”

In tough economic times it is particularly difficult to preserve the will to support equity of programming for children in communities where parents lack privilege and political power. These concerns are particularly timely in the current fiscal year. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that during spring and summer of 2011, “At least 23 states have made identifiable cuts in support for public schools. In many cases, these cuts undermine school finance systems that are intended to reduce disparities between high-wealth and low-wealth school districts, so the largest impacts may be felt in communities that are least able to compensate for the loss of funds from their own resources.” States that cut real dollars from last year’s level of expenditure include: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. In eight of these states cuts exceed $400 per pupil if spread evenly across all children in the state, including the drastic reduction in Washington state of over $1,000 per pupil.

Longtime California writer, Peter Schrag points to the hypocrisy of America’s supposed educational meritocracy: “No parent or student should have to offer scientific proof that attractive schools with working toilets and decent classroom environments are more productive than those without. None should be asked how they knew that having rats in their classrooms impaired their ability to learn. Nor should any school have to justify good libraries and courses and after-school programs in art or music with test scores and college attendance rates.”

Linda Darling-Hammond “wonders what we might accomplish as a nation if we could finally set aside what appears to be our de facto commitment to inequality, so profoundly at odds with our rhetoric of equity, and put the millions of dollars spent continually arguing and litigating into building a high-quality education system for all children.”

**What Will Be Required to Provide Opportunity for All Children?**

Improving the educational experience of the groups of children our society continues to leave behind will require moral determination and the imagination to understand how our most vulnerable children experience their schools and their lives. In 1962, Michael Harrington exposed America’s blindness to poverty. Fifty years later Harrington’s indictment remains trenchant: “There is a familiar America. It is celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines. It has the highest mass standard of living the world has ever known... This book is... about the other America. Here are the unskilled workers, the migrant farm workers, the aged, the minorities, and all the others who live in the economic underworld of American life... Now the American city has been transformed. The poor still inhabit the miserable housing in the central area, but they are increasingly isolated from contact with, or sight of, anybody else. Middle-class women coming in from Suburbia on a rare trip may catch the merest glimpse of the..."
other America on the way to an evening at the theater, but their children are segregated in suburban schools.”

Publication of The Other America helped create the will for Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and the passage in 1965 of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which included Title I to support schools serving large numbers or concentrations of children in poverty. When the programs of the 1960s were inadequate to a much more complicated task than anyone imagined, and when our society proved itself resistant to addressing racial injustice, a backlash ensued that again shut our eyes and our hearts. And so today the conventional wisdom tells us to blame public school teachers and their unions, to operate schools like a business portfolio— closing schools in the poorest communities and privatizing them as though that would address the real concerns. Pedro Noguera understands opportunity gaps as a moral indictment of a society that pronounces “justice for all” as our ideal but at the same time demonstrates a commitment to educating well only the children we believe are likely to be winners: “I fundamentally believe that educating all children… is an achievable goal, if we truly value all children. Of course, that is the real question: Does American society truly value all of its children?”

Justice for children seeking educational opportunity while living in poverty in America will require society to address the social and health conditions with which poor children struggle and to expand access to family resources, opportunity structures, and well-resourced schools. There is broad agreement that enriched pre-school for all children including children in poverty will be required to close gaps in academic preparedness before kindergarten. Children who read well by the end of third grade are less likely to drop out of school or to enter the school-prison pipeline. The civil rights community has spoken particularly pointedly to the need for universal, enriched early-childhood education: “Data on the benefits of high-quality early childhood education are overwhelming…. The highly successful reforms in New Jersey prompted by the Abbott v. Burke litigation illustrate how high-quality programs can be designed and implemented to produce extraordinary outcome changes in a relatively short period...”

We must fund schools fairly and adequately and improve support for conditions at school so that teachers can work collaboratively to reach children. Our partners at the Opportunity to Learn Campaign,79 the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education Campaign,80 the Forum on Educational Accountability,81 the ecumenical and interfaith religious communities, the civil rights community, and the academicians referenced in this report all agree that Congress must work with the states to address persistent and sizeable school inequality by ensuring that all children have access to schools that, at a minimum are well-resourced and staffed by fully prepared and effective professionals. At the school level, all children need qualified teachers, classes of a size to ensure individualized instruction and attention to each child’s learning needs, broad and challenging curriculum, enough counselors and librarians, science labs, music classes, broadband connectivity and a school climate and facilities conducive to learning.

Equity of learning conditions, the labor of 40 years of state legal battles, must not be sacrificed as state budgets are slashed in difficult times. We must resist, as in the continuing recession legislatures cut the statewide funding intended to compensate for grossly unequal local school district taxing capacity. We must resist as legislatures attempt to undercut the school funding remedies court orders have mandated by refusing to tap rainy-day funds or to raise taxes in times of economic downturn.

We must also remember that, though society has come to believe that what matters are outcomes measured by test scores, it is the experience of education that shapes children’s lives. The Consortium on Chicago School Research recently presented a strategy for improving school practice, a plan that echoes the work of James Comer82 and other thoughtful school reformers through the decades. The Consortium affirms the need for organizational development that is possible only within stable school communities: “The overall coherence of improvement efforts… is akin to a recipe…. We can think of relational trust as the oven heat that transforms the blended ingredients into a full, rich cake.” Here are the Consortium’s ingredients: school leadership that is inclusive, strategic and focused on instruction; development of welcome and involvement for parents and connections to community institutions; collaboration among a strong professional staff that works together for change and that values embedded, on-going staff development; a safe, nurturing and welcoming, stimulating school environment that is student-centered; and a curriculum that is broad, rich and academically demanding.84 The Consortium affirms values described in more faithful language by the churches: “As we strive to move our imperfect world closer to the realm of God, we recognize that we are all responsible for making sure that public schools, as primary
civic institutions, embody our love for one another. We are called to create institutions that serve families and children with hospitality. We are called to work as citizens for the resources that will support a climate of trust and community within each public school. We are also called to value those whose vocation is teaching.**

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul might well have been writing to us, with our culture of sound bites, chattering pundit, and a propensity to believe the conventional wisdom that seems agreeable and affordable without a tax increase. “Be not conformed to this world,” Paul writes, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2).

Endnotes
All photos are from the Save Our Schools March, Washington, DC, July 30, 2011, by Sandy Sorenson, UCC Justice & Witness Ministries.

14 Ibid., p. 6.
15 Ibid., p. 8.
17 Ibid., p. 8.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 5.
27 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
28 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
29 Pedro Noguera, City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), pp. 4-6.
38 Ibid., p. 96.
40 Linda Darling-Hammond, The Flat World and Education. How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future, p. 33
43 Gregory Michie, Holfer If You Hear Me: The Education of A Teacher and His Students (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), pp. 139-140.
46 Michael A. Rebell and Jessica Wolff, Moving Every Child Ahead, p. 34.
48 Ibid., p. 111.
50 Ibid., p. 1.
52 Linda Darling-Hammond, The Flat World and Education. How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future, p. 33
53 Linda Darling-Hammond, The Flat World and Education. How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future, p. 33
54 Michael A. Rebell and Jessica Wolff, Moving Every Child Ahead, p. 34.
56 Ibid., p. 111.
58 Linda Darling-Hammond, The Flat World and Education. How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future, p. 33
61 Gregory Michie, Holfer If You Hear Me: The Education of A Teacher and His Students (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), pp. 139-140.
64 Michael A. Rebell and Jessica Wolff, Moving Every Child Ahead, p. 34.
66 Ibid., p. 111.
68 Ibid., p. 1.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.