

Opportunity Gaps in Public Education Must Be Closed

A Resource of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy



As Congress prepares for the long overdue reauthorization of the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, faithful citizens are called to speak for eliminating injustices in the current version, No Child Left Behind, passed in the fall of 2001 with the stated goal of closing achievement gaps. Among the most serious of the current law's many problems is that NCLB has ratcheted up standardized testing and punished schools that cannot quickly raise scores while remaining silent about providing the resources to guarantee that every child has an equal opportunity to learn.

What are opportunity gaps?

Opportunity gaps are the differences in resources that society provides for children and schools from place to place. Despite more than 30 years of lawsuits in more than 40 states and the improved funding they have brought, inequity in funding for public education between wealthy and poor school districts remains 3:1 in most states. State school finance systems, still heavily reliant on local property taxes, only magnify disparities in family resources in an America where some children live in pockets of concentrated poverty and others in pockets of concentrated affluence. In a major 1999 policy statement, the National Council of Churches General Assembly lifts up opportunity gaps as a primary injustice:

“The wide disparities among public schools exist largely because schools reflect the affluence and/or the political power of the communities in which they are found. Within virtually every state there are school districts that lavish on their students three or four times the amount of money spent on other children in the same state. Most tellingly, the schools that offer the least to their students are often schools serving poor children, among whom children of color figure disproportionately, as they do in all the shortfalls of our common life.”

Congress must ensure that every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status has an opportunity to learn that includes:

- **a quality early childhood education**—Some states give all children the right to publicly subsidized, quality pre-school; in other states children lack pre-school and all day Kindergarten.
- **highly qualified teachers**—Some school districts can afford well-qualified, experienced teachers; in other districts where salaries are lower or conditions challenging, students are too often taught by a succession of substitute teachers.
- **a curriculum that will prepare students for college, work and community**—Some high schools offer Calculus, advanced lab sciences, and Advanced Placement. Others lack lab sciences even though these courses are required by their state universities.
- **equitable instructional resources**—Some schools have adequate libraries, computers, enough counselors to assist with college placement, and small classes. In other over-crowded schools personal attention is not guaranteed, and important programs and equipment are unaffordable.



Our faith calls us to care for children

Jesus valued children. National Council of Churches General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon reminds us: “Each and every child is the earth’s most precious resource, an amazing gift from God. This, of course, is not how they were regarded in Roman culture at the time of Jesus, which is why some of the stories found in the gospels would have been utterly shocking to the original audience. My favorite is from Mark 9: ‘Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them. And taking the child in his arms, he said to them [the



disciples], ‘whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me – and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the One who sent me.’ ... Little children... are the representatives, the ambassadors, of Jesus and, thus, of God! They are to be welcomed, cared for, because of their special relationship with our Lord... This is part of the eschatological reversal of scripture: Greatness is redefined as caring for, as receiving, the most vulnerable among us.”



Justice Waits

Caring for children means caring for the public schools that serve 50 million (90 percent) of our young people; yet public education in the United States has only become more politically embattled since the NCC General Assembly adopted its 1999 Policy Statement. In the fall of 2001, Congress passed a new reauthorization of the federal education law that ignored school inequity and failed to address the comprehensive needs that affect children’s ability to achieve in school. Ironically this law that we call “No Child Left Behind” has created a system in which more and more children are being left behind.

In a 2005 statement, “Ten Moral Concerns in the No Child Left Behind Act,”¹ the NCC Committee on Public Education and Literacy pointed to the law’s serious injustices that: radically increased standardized testing; demanded rapidly increasing test scores for all children; punished the schools unable to raise scores quickly; blamed teachers; failed to accommodate the needs of English language learners and children with special needs; narrowed the curriculum to the subjects tested; imposed a rigid and utopian 2014 deadline when all children would score proficient or their schools would be labeled “failures”; and remained silent about opportunity gaps by making “demands on states and school districts without fully funding reforms that would build capacity to close achievement gaps. To enable schools to comply with the law’s regulations and to create conditions that will raise achievement, society will need to increase... funding for the schools that serve our nation’s most vulnerable children...”

NCLB’s test-and-punish strategy has distracted our attention from the opportunity gaps beneath the achievement gaps. By mandating higher test scores while remaining silent about unequal resources, federal policy makers framed an agenda that can only be interpreted as an attack on educators themselves, passing the buck from Congress to the schools and demanding that teachers and children work harder and thereby compensate for society’s structural injustices. NCLB’s silence about opportunity to learn—about the public’s responsibility to invest in equity—is among the law’s most serious flaws.

What specific federal reforms will ensure an opportunity to learn for all children?

In the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress should **allocate federal resources for equity** and use its power to **press states to close opportunity gaps**. Congress should:

- Fully fund Title I in accord with the current formula. Congress has never kept its promise to fund what NCLB requires. By the fall of 2008, the seven year cumulative underfunding of NCLB was \$71 billion.
- Provide strong federal incentives for states to reform inequitable school funding formulas.
- Establish a comprehensive school funding indicator system under which states report data about spending patterns across and within school districts including access to core opportunities like early childhood education, qualified teachers, challenging curriculum, and instructional resources.
- Require states to develop plans for overcoming resource inequity and document their progress toward the goals they have themselves established.
- Create a transparent, regular federal report that exposes the scope of unequal access to opportunity.

Congress must ensure that public schools in all communities can promise every child an opportunity to learn.