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Fifty Years Later: A Chance to Get ESEA Back on Track

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Abstract: Looking at the evolution of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) over the last 50 years, this paper argues that many of the racial, social, and economic inequities of 1965 that President Johnson was hoping to address have only been accelerated. It's not only time for a modern rethink on educational equity, but also a much broader set of metrics for policymakers to consider for determining the progress of students, families, educators and school systems. Some of these indicators include equitable resources, multiple measures of inputs and outputs, professional competence, meaningful measures of success, responsive parental engagement and a system of shared responsibility inside and outside of schools to foster student learning.

Keywords: ESEA; educational inequalities; learning; shared responsibility

Cincuenta Años Después: Una Probabilidad de Conseguir que ESEA Retome el Rumbo

Resumen: Analizando la evolución de la Ley de Educación Primaria y Secundaria (ESEA) durante los últimos 50 años, este trabajo sostiene que muchas de las desigualdades raciales, sociales, y

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económicas que en 1965 el presidente Johnson esperaba abordar se han acelerado. Este es el momento de un replanteamiento moderno sobre equidad educativa, y también de que los legisladores consideren un conjunto mucho más amplio de indicadores para determinar el progreso de los estudiantes, sus familias, educadores y los sistemas escolares. Algunos de estos indicadores incluyen recursos equitativos, múltiples medidas de entrada y salida, competencia profesional, medidas significativas de éxito, participación de los padres y un sistema de responsabilidad compartida dentro y fuera de las escuelas para fomentar el aprendizaje de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: ESEA; las desigualdades educativas; el aprendizaje; responsabilidad compartida

Cinquenta Anos mais tarde: A Chance de Retomar os Rumos da ESEA

Resumo: Analisando-se a evolução da Acta de Direito do Ensino Básico e Secundário (ESEA) ao longo dos últimos 50 anos, este artigo argumenta que muitas das desigualdades social, racial e económica, que em 1965 o presidente Johnson esperava abordar senaceleraram. Este é o momento de uma releitura moderna da equidade educacional, e que os legisladores considerem um conjunto muito mais amplo de indicadores para avaliar o progresso dos alunos, as famílias, os educadores e os sistemas escolares. Alguns destes indicadores incluem recursos equitativos, várias medidas de entrada e saída, competência profissional, medidas significativas do sucesso, envolvimento dos pais e de um sistema compartilhado de responsabilidades dentro e fora das escolas para promover os aprendizagens dos alunos.

Palavras-chave: ESEA; desigualdades educacionais; aprendizagem; responsabilidade compartilhada

Introduction

Today, the small border town of Cotulla, Texas doesn't quite feel or look the same way it did when the [young Mr. Johnson taught there in 1928](#). But its students and schools continue to have a profound influence on education policy conversations in 2015, in much the same way they shaped the thinking of Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson would later become known to the American people as President Lyndon Baines Johnson or "LBJ." Johnson never forgot his experience working in a segregated "Mexican school," seeing "children going through a garbage pile, shaking the coffee grounds from the grapefruit rinds and sucking the rinds for the juice that was left" (All Things Considered, 2014). When Johnson first signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law in 1965 on the heels of the Civil Rights Act, he and many others envisioned the law as a component of the "War of Poverty" – convinced it would help to advance quality education as a lever out of poverty for children and families across the country like those in Cotulla.

The former president would likely be disheartened to read a [report](#) that finds a majority of schoolchildren nationwide, 51 percent, come from low-income families (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). His native Texas serves a student population now in which 60 percent of students are eligible for support through Title 1, the centerpiece funding stream of the original ESEA that provides targeted federal resources to traditionally disadvantaged youth. He also probably could have never imagined that the Cotulla of 1928 in many ways mirrors today's public schools, where students of color represent more than 50 percent of youth and are more than twice as likely to attend segregated schools. Second language learners now represent 10 percent of all public school students nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; UCLA Civil Rights Project, 2012).

Similar to much of the region along the Texas border, an education opportunity desert exists in our nation between the "haves" and "have-nots," and there are few examples as glaring as the disparities that exist in our public schools. What some schools consider to be basic aspects of a

quality educational experience, including access to courses like Algebra I, geometry and Advanced Placement offerings are [more of a rarity than the norm](#) in schools with high African-American and Latino populations in states like Mississippi, New York, Pennsylvania, Florida and Nevada. Students are facing a resurgence of *de facto* segregation by both race and socioeconomic status. And, we continue to witness pervasive educational inequalities, especially in the inequitable distribution of school funding to low-income communities of color.

These disparities in school funding are just as destructive as the injustices of previous decades, the same injustices that President Johnson aspired to address with a \$1 billion investment in low-income schools almost 50 years ago (Thomas & Brady, 2005). And while much ado has accompanied recent discussions about annual testing in ESEA, improving teacher evaluation systems and the adoption of new standards, too little has been done at the local, state and federal level to stimulate more equitable inputs for schools serving poor children and children of color.

States can change the historical inequalities that continue to undermine equal rights. [California recently passed a new funding law](#) that allocates all funding equitably, based on student needs (Taylor, 2013). Mississippi has a chance to become another model of progress. The state's voters will cast ballots in 2015 on a measure [that will require the state legislature to fund all public schools at equal levels](#) for the first time in history (National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2014a).

Recommendations for Accountability Policy Change

The dominant education policy thinking continues to focus more on narrow testing and sanctions, including closing schools in low-income communities, rather than on investing in and improving schools. Remnants of the standards-based movement fueled by [A Nation at Risk](#) (1983) still have a strong-hold on remedies to improve public education. But there is some momentum growing now in current talks around reauthorization of ESEA to return to the roots of the original law.

A shift is happening away from education policy autopilot, signified by approaches that have kept our education policy agenda cruising on standards-based strategies for too long. Some states like New Hampshire and Washington are already ahead of the game, looking at the right mix of deeper learning approaches to school that focus on building students skills in areas like critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communications, and most importantly, focusing on the right 'inputs' for achieving more meaningful student outcomes. Adding to the chorus for a more sound way forward on accountability, [we recently released recommendations](#) (National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 2014b) on how our leaders can make the policy changes necessary to advance equal access to resources and quality instruction in our nation's schools.

These recommendations (2014b) represent much more than fair funding strategies and smarter inputs. They reinforce the need shift to accountability systems that are based on school-community partnerships—allowing for inspiring learning experiences at schools, predicated upon more cohesive school systems, from the cradle to career. They also focus on building the capacity of students, staff and educators to flourish—largely dependent on the professional competence of educators and school personnel who have the expertise to make instruction engaging and personal. Here are the critical elements of our recommendations:

1. **Appropriate and equitable resources** that ensure opportunities to learn, respond to students' needs, prioritize racial diversity and integration of schools, strengthen school system capacity, and meaningfully support improvement.

2. **Multiple measures of inputs and outputs for 21st century readiness:** Accountability systems should acknowledge that both inputs and relevant outcomes matter, and thus should monitor both appropriate inputs that support academic, social, emotional, and physical health, along with student and school outcomes (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) that demonstrate college and career readiness and civic literacy.
3. **Shared responsibility:** Each level of the system – from federal, state, and local governments to districts and schools – should be held accountable for the investments it must make and for the oversight, accountability, data collection, monitoring, and actions it must undertake to produce high-quality learning opportunities for each and every child and to ultimately achieve equity in student outcomes.
4. **Professional competence:** Systems of educator preparation and ongoing development should ensure that educators have the time and supports necessary to acquire the knowledge about curriculum, teaching, assessment, linguistic and cultural competence, implicit bias, and student support needed to teach diverse students effectively.
5. **Informative assessments for meaningful 21st Century learning:** A system of assessments should document both student and school system progress using tools that evaluate deeper-learning skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity) that are necessary and valuable for today's and tomorrow's world and that represent authentic applications of knowledge.
6. **Transparency:** School systems should provide useful, publicly accessible, and actionable school system information and data for parents and community members, as well as students and educators.
7. **Meaningful and responsive parental and family engagement:** Schools must create opportunities for meaningful engagement with all parents and families to tap their expertise and gain their input in the teaching and learning process and in decisions associated in the planning and implementation of P-12 system investments.
8. **Capacity building:** Finally, accountability should be geared towards continuous improvement of school systems. When intervention is necessary, it should be a mechanism for strengthening schools, education professionals, and their communities.

Conclusion

President Johnson wasn't thinking about education accountability in 1965 the same way that the media and policymakers are today. But he was thinking about his students in Cotulla, and the millions of students who are still waiting for voters and key decision-makers to prioritize significant investments in their future.

The issue of equity deserves a modern rethink, from classrooms, to school boards, even the halls of Congress. For too long, conversations have focused on providing a fair and basic education, and have been exactly that – too basic. No students deserve to learn in an environment that just meets their basic needs by providing only the most adequate mix of the right curriculum, educators and tools for learning. All students deserve a learning experience that is dynamic and engaging and most importantly, relevant to the world outside of schools. It's going to take much more than the volleyballs and softball bats President Johnson purchased for his first class in Cotulla to improve education opportunities for all youth. It's going to take some intentionality, rethinking, and a commitment to prioritize the country's most underserved students to get us out of the equity desert, and headed towards an education future with richer, greener pastures.

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