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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The War on Poverty Remains a Stalemate

Education gaps between socioeconomic classes haven't narrowed in the past half-century.

By Eric A. Hanushek and Paul E. Peterson

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Students at a Head Start program in Pennsylvania. PHOTO: ELLEN F. O'CONNELL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The War on Poverty drags on. President Trump's budget proposes heavy cuts in domestic spending, but not to compensatory-education programs, which aim to lift the achievement

levels of disadvantaged students. Since 1980 the federal government has spent almost \$500 billion (in 2017 dollars) on compensatory education and another \$250 billion on Head Start programs for low-income preschoolers. Forty-five states, acting under court threats of settlements, have directed money specifically to their neediest districts. How much have these efforts helped?

To find out, we tracked achievement gaps between those born into families with the highest and lowest levels of education and household resources. We looked at both the gap between the top and bottom tenths of the socioeconomic distribution (the 90-10 gap) and the top and bottom quarters (the 75-25 gap).

Our finding, published by EducationNext, is that the gaps have not narrowed over the past 50 years, despite all the money spent on that objective. In 1971, shortly after the launch of the War on Poverty, 14-year-olds in the bottom decile trailed those in the top decile by three to four years worth of school. For those who were born in 2001 and turned 14 in 2015, the gap was still three to four years. Similarly, the 75-25 gap has remained wide—between 2½ and three years.

We examined 98 separate assessments of student achievement in math, reading and science, administered to adolescents born between 1954 and 2001 by the U.S. government and trustworthy international agencies. The surveys also collected information on parents' educational attainment and the material possessions in the home, thereby supplying information needed to ascertain the students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Surprisingly, we were the first to use this valuable storehouse of information to examine the success of the war on poverty.

The persistence of the 90-10 and 75-25 gaps is not caused by changes in schools' ethnic composition. It is true that the white share of the school-age population has fallen, from 75% to 54%, but the gaps are as sustained for white students as they are for the school-age population as a whole. The black-white test-score gap did narrow, but that progress halted during the past quarter-century.

It wouldn't be so bad if a rising tide were lifting all boats—that is, if haves and have-nots alike were reaching new levels of accomplishment, despite persistent gaps. But the past quarter-century has seen no gains in overall student performance at 17. Gains observed at 14 dissipate by the time students reach the last year of high school and are expected to enter the workforce or college.

Whether and how these gaps can be narrowed is beyond the scope of our study. But it's clear that what America has been doing, at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars, hasn't worked.

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