

## **Why Should I Worry About Schools My Children Won't Attend?**

*By Arthur Levine, President of Teachers College*

*Published: 5/27/2005*

The title for this essay comes from Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, specifically from a debate between the brothers Levin over social responsibility. Sergei, visiting his country sibling, argues the importance of hospitals and schools. "Can there be any doubt of the usefulness of education?" he asks. "If it's good for you, it is good for everyone." Konstantin counters, "Maybe all that is good, but why should I worry about setting up medical centers that I will never use and schools that I won't send my children to...?" Sergei changes the topic.

Konstantin's question looms larger today than ever before-indeed, it stands at the center of the education debate in our society. This year, rather than expressing my own views in this space, I will seek to discuss it on behalf of the Teachers College community-trustees, faculty, students, administration and staff.

Last spring, the College completed a two-year strategic planning process. The overriding conclusion was that Teachers College should focus its efforts-teaching, research and service-on a single issue: educational equity, or what is often referred to colloquially as "the achievement gap." With the enthusiastic endorsement of our Board of Trustees, the TC community is now embarking on a major effort-which we call The Campaign for Educational Equity-to close the gaps in educational access, expectations and outcomes between the most advantaged and disadvantaged populations in society.

Today our country has two education systems, separate and unequal. One chiefly serves our more affluent, suburban white children, while the other primarily serves low-income, urban children of color. There are great disparities between the two in teacher quality, curriculum, resources, facilities, funding, student achievement, graduation rates and college attendance. And these, in turn, reflect broader societal inequities. Consider these realities:

Thirteen percent of African-American children are born with low birth weight-double the rate for whites.

**Median black family income is 64 percent of median white family income-and median black family net worth is only 12 percent of white family net worth.**

**Twenty percent of low-income children are without consistent health insurance, versus 12 percent of all U.S. children. Thirteen percent of black children are without health insurance, versus 8 percent of white children.**

**Black pre-schoolers are one-third less likely than whites to get standard vaccinations.**

**Twenty percent of black children suffer from anemia versus 8 percent of all children.**

**Low-income children have dangerously high blood levels of lead at five times the rate of middle-class children.**

**African-American students are three times more likely than whites to be placed in special education programs, and only half as likely to be in gifted programs in elementary and secondary schools.**

**By age three, children of professionals have vocabularies nearly 50 percent greater than those of working-class children, and twice as large as those of children on welfare.**

**By the end of fourth grade, African-American and Latino students, and poor students of all races, are two years behind their wealthier, predominantly white peers in reading and math. By eighth grade, they have slipped three years behind, and by 12th grade, four years behind.**

**One in three African-American males will be incarcerated in state or federal prison at some point during their lives, and the rate is significantly higher for black men who do not finish high school. For Hispanic males, the rate is one in six; for white males, one in 17.**

**Homicide has been the leading cause of death among African Americans aged 15 to 34 since 1978. The lifetime risk of violent death for young black males is one in 27, and for black females, one in 17. By contrast, one in 205 young white males and one in 496 young white females are murdered.**

**Among 18 to 24 year-olds, about 90 percent of whites have either completed high school or earned a GED. Among blacks, the rate is**

81 percent, and among Hispanics, 63 percent. However, a much larger share of blacks earn GEDs than whites, and only about 50 percent of black students earn regular diplomas, compared with about 75 percent of whites.

Fewer black than white eighth graders eventually enroll in college the year after high school graduation (44 percent vs. 58 percent), and fewer still persist to earn a bachelor's degree (17 percent vs. 35 percent). Black students are only about half as likely as whites to have earned a bachelor's degree by age 29, and Hispanics are only one-third as likely.

These disparities cannot be permitted to continue. As an institution, Teachers College has resolved to turn our energies and our efforts to a campaign to reduce them. The following are some of the questions we've asked ourselves as we embark upon this mission.

### **Why Educational Equity?**

We are well aware of the enormity of the challenge we have embraced. We do this neither as naïve Pollyannas nor latter-day Don Quixotes. At Teachers College, we view educational inequity as the greatest challenge facing education today and a powerful threat to our country. It is a moral threat: In an age when good jobs require higher levels of skills and knowledge than ever before in history, children are denied the education to acquire them, simply because of their parents' skin color or income. It is an economic threat: In an era in which employers cross national borders in search of talented workers, the children in our cities lack the skills for gainful employment. It is a social threat: As the numbers on the previous page illustrate, inadequately educated children are more likely to be arrested, become pregnant, use drugs, experience violence and require public assistance. And it is a civic threat, because our children's overall enfranchisement-their personal stake in society-so clearly mirrors their educational level.

### **Why Teachers College?**

The TC community has embraced the issue of educational equity because, first and foremost, this always has been at the heart of what we do. The city mothers of New York in the late 19th century, alarmed at the plight of immigrant children who were unable to break the bonds of poverty, found that the schools were unprepared to help those children. The women created instead an institution to prepare a new breed of teacher capable of educating

the disadvantaged. The founding mission of TC, then, was educational equity. Each year I remind new students of this. I explain that TC's mission and purpose is best described with two Hebrew words: "Tikkun Olam"-to repair the world.

We embrace the issue of educational equity because our community believes it to be imperative in a time when education is declining as a national priority. The Baby Boomers, who make up over 60 percent of the American electorate, put school reform on the national agenda because they wanted good schools for their children.

Today their children are largely through school and the Baby Boomers' concern has shifted to their parents, who are aging and growing more frail. The Baby Boomers are no longer trumpeting the need for school reform. They want health insurance, social security and elder care. The result is that education dropped from being the first or second priority on the national agenda during the 2000 election to number five in 2004.

I believe that trend will only continue as the needs and wants of the Baby Boomers further shape public policy. The result will be that the most disadvantaged children in our country will be left even further behind. Our nation has been through more than 20 years of attempts to reform and improve schools. Suburban schools are indeed better today, but no urban school system in America has yet been successfully turned around. The Campaign for Educational Equity is intended to change that and to ensure that the children who attend poor schools are not forgotten. The TC community believes the equity issue should be as important to education schools as AIDS or cancer is to medical schools.

We also embrace educational equity because it is at the heart of our faculty's work. Very conservatively, well over 70 percent of our faculty are engaged in research in this area.

And finally, we embrace this issue because TC is singularly well designed to undertake a "Campaign for Educational Equity." The nation's public schools, though they wield tremendous impact, cannot solve the problem of educational inequity alone. Families and communities are essential. The TC faculty cover three distinct fields-education, psychology and health-that encompass this broader view. This breadth permits us to study subjects such as learning, teaching, and the physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of children in schools, homes and neighborhoods. We are also blessed to be affiliated with Columbia

University, and we look forward to working with our university colleagues on the Campaign.

### **What Will The Campaign Do?**

There will be three components to the Campaign for Educational Equity. The first is research. The Campaign will serve as a clearinghouse for research on educational equity by bringing together TC faculty who work in the area and by acting as a convening authority for our Columbia colleagues, experts from around the globe, and organizations that focus on equity issues.

The Campaign will engage in targeted research; that is, it will identify priority areas, such as preschool education, that are ripe for action and where there is genuine capacity to substantially close the gap. The Campaign will spotlight the best existing research in the area, supplement it when necessary and assemble the best minds from within TC and outside to reach a consensus on what works and how that should be translated into policy.

The Campaign will also engage in opportunistic research. For example, if a TC faculty member's research has the potential to make a significant contribution, the Campaign will run with it.

The Campaign will also generate two signature products: a report card and a symposium. Every other year, a report card will be issued on the condition of educational equity in each of the 50 states. Consisting of a bushel of equity indicators that are currently being developed by Laurie Tisch Visiting Professor Richard Rothstein, the report card will be designed to educate the public and stimulate state action.

The symposium will be an annual event in which the Campaign brings together policy makers, practitioners, scholars and the media to discuss what we know and what we should do in priority areas. The inaugural symposium, organized and chaired by Henry Levin, TC's William H. Kilpatrick Professor of Economics and Education, will focus on the social costs of inequity—that is, the economic, social and political price we all pay for inadequate education. It will be held at Columbia University's Lerner Hall on October 24 and 25.

The second component of the Campaign is dissemination. The Campaign will reject the traditional peer-reviewed journal as its primary means of reaching the public. While this method has its strengths, speed is not one of them: In an age of instant information, it takes, on average, well over a year for academic

research to be published. The writing style of academic journals is not accessible to the public the Campaign is seeking to affect. And the impact of the research published in these journals is not as powerful as it needs to be; citation rates are far too low.

Certainly, we will vet our publications with leading experts in the field. But the Campaign's priority will be to target its research at the actors needed to implement it, including the media, government, school boards, school administrators, teachers and funders. For instance, to prompt the legislature in a given state to act on its research, the Campaign might translate that research into lay-friendly English, create a Web site, brief key office holders and staff, arrange for hearings and testimony, locate a sponsor for legislation and even develop model legislation itself.

The third component is demonstration projects. Our goal is to implement Campaign research in the field-to test and adopt it in real communities, families and schools through programs that have the potential to become national models. The nucleus of this effort already exists in the form of the TC Education Zone Partnership, a commitment the College has made to working with our neighborhood schools in Harlem and other underserved areas of the city. To date, the Partnership comprises an arts-inclusive high school, the Heritage school, that was founded by a TC faculty member; a reading and writing curriculum created at the College that has been adopted citywide; an initiative to increase new teacher retention; establishment of a prototype professional development program designed to replace the existing model; a reading program in which TC students work with children in neighborhood schools; and much more. A special report on many of these activities begins on page four of this Annual Report.

#### **How Will Success Be Determined?**

The Campaign is not an academic exercise. Its success will be measured by our ability to:

Keep educational equity on the national agenda;

Increase understanding of the issue by the public, policy makers, practitioners and funders;

Serve as the primary convening authority on the issue for experts in the field and organizations working in the area;

Become the principal source of information on equity for policy makers and practitioners of the press;

**Point to actions taken by policy makers and practitioners as a consequence of the Campaign's work;**

**Reduce the equity gap for some children.**

**And finally, to return to Konstantin Levin:**

**Why Worry About Schools our Children Won't Attend?**

**The Campaign for Educational Equity epitomizes the historic legacy of Teachers College. Those of us who work at TC today stand on the shoulders of giants-faculty who served as the leading scholars, advocates and developers of educational policy and practice in this country and around the world. Their careers and their corpus of work were devoted to answering Levin's question. Again and again, over the course of a century, they demonstrated the logic behind bringing the benefits of education to all members of society, and again and again they showed us how it could be done.**

**In doing so, they made a statement of profound importance about the mission of Teachers College and ultimately, of all colleges. They took a clear stance in a debate that has raged for as long as TC has existed, namely: Should universities be havens for detached scholars interested in knowledge for knowledge's sake, as educator Abraham Flexner and economist Thorsten Veblen suggested early in the last century? Or should they be engaged actors concerned with the most critical issues facing society, as former University of Wisconsin president Charles Van Hise championed?**

**Of course, real institutions are neither as detached nor as engaged, neither as scholarly nor as activist, as these polarities suggest. However, from its earliest days, Teachers College has committed itself to Van Hise's view of the university. And it is that view that guides us again now.**

**Consider that, at the turn of the last century, Van Hise attempted to build an "engaged university" in Madison. His initiative became known as the Wisconsin idea.**

**Van Hise's model sought to engage in high-quality research on the most pressing issues facing an agricultural state. When asked by the state legislature what he saw as the university's contribution to Wisconsin, Van Hise replied that the university had "invented the cow." And, in a manner of speaking, it had, by improving**

cattle breeding, herd size, milk production, and animal health and weight.

Beyond this, Van Hise's university developed a demonstration farm where it could show the best in animal and crop practices. It went on the road to disseminate successful models, such as high-yield seed, to working farmers.

It offered instruction during lunch hour and on weekends-times when the public could actually attend. Faculty made instructional visits around the state, traveling to the far reaches of Wisconsin by train. It was joked that one was as likely to meet a professor in a coach as on campus.

Scholarly expertise was translated into legislative proposals, as professors served as members of state commissions and policy bodies, and as advisors to the governor and legislature. The university became the government's preferred source of knowledge and counsel.

In a very real sense, in focusing on equity and actively seeking to improve conditions for the most disadvantaged in society, TC is reaffirming its allegiance to the Wisconsin idea. We recommit ourselves to both scholarship and action. TC will engage in objective research of the highest quality and application of the research to address what the TC community believes to be the most important issue facing education.

Indeed, in my experience, the reason most TC faculty and students chose education as a career, even though other careers would have been far more lucrative, is the opportunity it provides to apply what we learn and truly make a difference. In my senior year of college, I found a pamphlet in the Brandeis University library entitled "Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?" It was written in 1932 by Teachers College Professor George Counts and probably had more to do with my choosing education as a career than anything I have ever read. Upon becoming president of the College in 1994, I asked the Gottesman Libraries if they could locate a copy. It turned out that Counts' book, a Depression-era tract by then more than half a century old, had read better when I was 22 than 46. However, the challenge it presented has never diminished in importance or urgency. Our hope is that TC and those who will join us in the years ahead can indeed create a new social order, which promises equity in educational access, expectations and outcomes for all.