

The Social Contradiction that is Education

A robust education is widely considered as the baseline requirement for future social mobility and economic opportunity in the United States. Educational attainment is the single biggest determining factor of wealth, health, and life satisfaction across numerous countries and cultures. Paradoxically, the structural deficiencies within the education system continue to contribute significantly to inequality and poor social outcomes. These unjust structural deficiencies include the high cost of college tuition, systemic and unconscious racism, the lack of access to AP classes in poor and rural areas, the overcrowding of urban schools, and social gatekeeping at elite liberal arts and Ivy League schools. These problems engrain class stratification, reduce economic mobility, and are fundamentally unjust. How can the US education system be redeemed in light of the harms that can be attributed to that same system?

There are three ways this contradiction could be remedied: investment, access, and equity. Let's consider investment first since it's often lack of investment that turns out to be the root of other structural ills. In nominal terms the US spends more money per student than any other country in the world but when compared with the size of the US GDP education spending in the US is paltry, with the US ranking last among developed nations on a percentage basis. For instance, the current US military federal spending budget for FY2021 currently stands at ~\$753 billion while the US federal education

spending budget is ~\$66.6 billion. This disparity of funding clearly demonstrates that education is a much lower priority within the US federal government when compared with military expenditure. Higher federal investment in education would allow for more instructors, counselors, and programs, while also reducing class sizes, improving student outcomes, and increasing education affordability for all students.

Access is the second way in which the structurally unjust aspects of the education system can be addressed. Assuming more federal investment in education, a universal approach should be taken that gives all students access to advanced placement (AP) programs. Rural and underfunded schools should not be left out of access to AP classes simply due to their small size or lack of funds, especially when the technology exists to easily put these programs online. At the college level, making community college free would allow students the opportunity to complete basic prerequisites and then transfer to a 4-year program to finish their undergraduate degree without incurring major debts. This change would make college more accessible to millions of students every year regardless of their socio-economic status.

Finally, equity within the education system is key to social justice reform, as well as, positive societal and individual outcomes. The dismantling of legacy student admissions in elite schools and the expansion of admission considerations that look beyond standard tests would open the most prestigious schools to a greater diversity of candidates. In addition, equity has the potential to be addressed at the level of individual instructors. This can happen through ensuring that all students are treated fairly,

examining unconscious racial bias that may be affecting instruction, and continuously evaluating course materials to be more representative and inclusive. Teachers and administrators should consider language needs, physical or mental assistance, as well as, counseling, mentoring, and enrichment needs when improving their schooling environment. The potential exists for education to significantly improve the lives of diverse people and communities without the degree of harm that has followed the system for decades. This change will require advocacy and action from parents, admins, legislators, teachers, and students coming together to build a more just system.