

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Our Achievement-Gap Mania

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A DECADE AGO, THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT ushered in an era of federally driven educational accountability focused on narrowing the chasms between the test scores and graduation rates of students of different incomes and races. The result was a whole new way of speaking and thinking about the issue: “Achievement gaps” became reformers’ catch phrase, and closing those gaps became *the* goal of American education policy.

Today, the notion of “closing achievement gaps” has become synonymous with education reform. The Education Trust, perhaps the nation’s most influential K-12 advocacy group, explains: “Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement.” The National Education Foundation has launched its own “Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative.” The California Achievement Gap Educational Foundation was launched in 2008 to “eliminate the systemic achievement gap in California K-12 public education.” Elite charter-school operator Uncommon Schools says its mission is running “outstanding urban charter public schools that close the achievement gap and prepare low-income students to graduate from college.” *Education Week*, the newspaper of record for American education, ran 63 stories mentioning “achievement gaps” in the first six months of this year.

The No Child Left Behind Act’s signal contribution has been this sustained fixation on achievement gaps—a fixation that has been almost universally hailed as an unmitigated good. Near the end of his presidency, George W. Bush bragged that NCLB “focused the country’s attention on the fact that we had an achievement gap that—you

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know, white kids were reading better in the 4th grade than Latinos or African-American kids. And that's unacceptable for America." Margaret Spellings, Bush's secretary of education, said last year, "The raging fire in American education is the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their peers."

Indeed, at the elite level, there is bipartisan consensus on this question. President Obama has echoed Bush, terming education the "civil-rights issue of our time" and explaining that his agenda is intended to address "the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students." Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, repeated the familiar formulation last year at the National Press Club, declaring: "The achievement gap is unacceptable. Education is the civil-rights issue of our generation."

Such sentiments are admirable, and helping the lowest-achieving students do better is of course a worthy and important aim. But the effort to close gaps has hardly been an unmitigated blessing. In their glib self-confidence, the champions of that effort have refused to confront its costs and unintended consequences, and have been far too quick to silence skeptics by branding them blind defenders of the status quo (if not calling them outright racists).

The truth is that achievement-gap mania has led to education policy that has shortchanged many children. It has narrowed the scope of schooling. It has hollowed out public support for school reform. It has stifled educational innovation. It has distorted the way we approach educational choice, accountability, and reform.

And its animating principles — including its moral philosophy — are, at best, highly questionable. Indeed, the relentless focus on gap-closing has transformed school reform into little more than a less objectionable rehash of the failed Great Society playbook.

CHANGING EDUCATION'S MISSION

The 21st-century education debate bears witness to the political genius of Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, who had the foresight to repackage the social-welfare agenda of the Great Society by putting children front and center. While this tactic yielded some real benefits, highlighting the needs of young people who were too long marginalized or ignored, it has also distorted our understanding of schools and their mission.

Today, debates about the purpose and provision of education — on the left and the right alike — are reduced to platitude-laden charges that it is up to schools to do what the social reformers of the 1960s could not accomplish through entitlements, social-welfare programs, or other Great Society initiatives. Along the way, reformers have casually abandoned more ambitious visions of democratic education, as well as the credo that every child deserves an opportunity to fulfill his potential. It is crucial to recognize that “reformers,” not educators, have driven this shift: In a 2008 survey, for instance, education pollsters Steve Farkas and Anne Duffett asked, “For the public schools to help the U.S. live up to its ideals of justice and equality, do you think it’s more important that they focus equally on all students regardless of their backgrounds or achievement levels . . . or disadvantaged students who are struggling academically?” Eighty-six percent of teachers said all students and just 11% said disadvantaged students. Yet education reformers are doing their very best to counter this healthy democratic impulse — and they have largely succeeded.

Today, school reformers, state and local education officials, exemplary charter-school operators, and managers of philanthropic foundations make it very clear that they are primarily in the business of educating poor black and Hispanic children. Indeed, anyone who has spent much time in the company of school reformers in the past decade has seen this practice turn almost comical, as when charter-school operators try to one-up one another over who can claim the most disadvantaged student population.

All of this has eroded traditional notions of what constitutes a complete education. Because of the way “achievement gaps” are measured — using scores on standardized reading and math tests — any effort to “close the achievement gap” must necessarily focus on instruction in reading and math. Hence many schools, particularly those at risk of getting failing grades under NCLB, have fixated on reading and math exclusively; other subjects — art and music, foreign language, history, even science — have been set aside to make more time and resources available for remedial instruction. The *New York Times* has reported that, in Sacramento, California, poorly performing students are permitted to enroll only in math, reading, and gym, in a mad dash to help close the achievement gap. The *Wall Street Journal* has reported that, facing budget pressures and a relentless press to drive up reading and math scores among the least proficient students, school districts nationwide

are axing foreign-language instruction. Indeed, according to the Center for Applied Linguistics, between 1997 and 2008, the share of U.S. elementary schools offering foreign-language classes fell by roughly one-fifth.

These developments have compromised schools' ability to cultivate students' aptitudes and talents. For instance, Therese Sullivan Caccavale—former president of the National Network for Early Language Learning—has noted that research shows that “[c]hildren who learn a foreign language beginning in early childhood demonstrate certain cognitive advantages over children who do not . . . [and] children who study a foreign language, even when this second language study takes time away from the study of mathematics, outperform (on standardized tests of mathematics) students who do not study a foreign language and have more mathematical instruction during the school day.”

Lost too has been an appreciation of schools' broader mission. For American founders like Benjamin Rush and Thomas Jefferson, the primary function of schooling was to produce democratic citizens. In Rush's telling phrase, schools needed to mold “republican machines.” Yet in a 2010 survey, 70% of high-school social-studies teachers reported that civics has been marginalized by the focus on reading and math assessments.

It is clear that these trends do not represent the wishes of parents. Last year, for example, University of Wisconsin professor Ken Goldstein reported that 64% of Wisconsin adults identify music as very or somewhat important when it comes to schooling. The similar figures for foreign-language instruction are 59%, and for physical education, 80%. It is not parents or the public, any more than it is the teachers, who are pushing schools to become gap-closing factories.

Of particular concern is the way “achievement-gap mania” has forced educators to quietly but systematically shortchange some students in the rush to serve others. Pollsters Farkas and Duffett, for instance, have reported that struggling students possess an unrivaled claim on teachers' attention. In 2008, the team found that 60% of teachers surveyed said that struggling students were a “top priority” at their schools while just 23% said the same of “academically advanced” students—even on a question to which teachers could provide multiple answers. When asked which students were most likely to get one-on-one attention from teachers, 80% of the survey participants said academically struggling students, while just 5% said academically advanced students.

Consider the case of Florida, which has been celebrated, especially by conservatives, for its success in closing racial achievement gaps. Mary Jane Tappen, Florida's deputy chancellor of education, has credited, in part, state policies that require any administrator or teacher who will have even *one* "English-language learner" in his school or class to sit through 60 hours of ELL-specific training. English teachers are required to receive 300 *hours* of training in teaching English as a second language. Clearly, those hundreds of hours of training consume dollars and time that can no longer be devoted to educating other children in subjects other than English as a second language.

The effects of achievement-gap mania have been particularly severe in the area of advanced instruction and gifted education. In February 2009, the California Legislature adopted a plan that allows public schools to divert state money for gifted children to "any educational purpose." A 2010 study by the California Legislative Analyst's Office found that 68% of the 231 school districts surveyed had shifted resources away from education for gifted students. California's Evergreen School District, for example, responded by eliminating all its programs for approximately 800 gifted children. After noting the extensive cuts being made to gifted and talented programs, the *San Francisco Chronicle* observed: "Critics see courses tailored for exceptional students as elitist and not much of an issue when compared with the vast number of students who are lagging grades behind their peers or dropping out of school."

Frank C. Worrell, faculty director of the Academic Talent Development Program at the University of California, Berkeley, has identified part of the problem with this approach. "We have focused on bringing up the bottom," he explains. "But we have failed to recognize that by ignoring the top, we are creating another problem. We are not sparking the creativity of those who have the most potential to make outstanding contributions."

Of course, advocates of the gap-closing agenda have not presented their cause in these terms. They do not tell schools to ignore white or affluent students, or non-tested subjects—they merely call for a focus on achievement gaps and insist on ignoring the downsides to doing so. Education Trust vice president Amy Wilkins has rejected the notion that there may be a tradeoff between universality and rigor, declaring it a "false choice." But the evidence suggests it is a very real choice, and one with grave implications for American education.

EDUCATION'S NEW LOSERS

It should be obvious that the United States cannot afford to be cavalier about the education of its best-performing students. Stanford University's Eric Hanushek, Harvard University's Paul Peterson, and the University of Munich's Ludger Woessmann reported earlier this year that the share of American students who are accomplished in math trails those of most other industrialized nations. In 2006, 30 of the 56 nations participating in the Program for International Student Assessment math test had a larger percentage of students scoring at the international equivalent of the advanced level on our own National Assessment of Educational Progress tests than we did. On the 2007 Trends in International Math and Science Study, just 6% of American eighth graders scored "advanced." In Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Finland, however, the proportion of students achieving at the same level was at least three times as large. Another dozen nations had at least twice as large a share of advanced students.

A universal and exclusive focus on low-achieving kids ignores the fact that different education strategies work best for different kinds of students. Earlier this year, the Fordham Institute's Mike Petrilli — a former Bush-administration official and NCLB champion who has since expressed concerns about the law — observed: "The question of whether affluent and disadvantaged kids need a different kind of education — different instructional strategies, different curriculum, maybe even different kinds of teachers — is a serious one. This discussion is easily demagogued . . . But it's not racist to say that poor kids — who generally come to school with much less vocabulary, exposure to print, and much else — might need something different — more intense, more structured — than their well-off, better-prepared peers."

Before they even enter the classroom, many children from low-income and minority households are at a distinct educational disadvantage. Research demonstrates that children from more educated families tend to start school with much larger vocabularies, more exposure to the written word, more time having been read to, and more of the habits that make for a responsible, successful student. Kindergarteners from low-income households typically have a vocabulary of about 5,000 words, compared to the typical 20,000-word vocabulary of their more advantaged peers. The disparity results, in part, from the fact that many low-income children

don't attend pre-school; low-income parents speak to their children about one-third as much as parents who are professionals; low-income parents read to their children much less than do other parents; and low-income children watch much more television than do their peers.

The implication is that, from the very beginning, disadvantaged and advantaged children have different educational needs and stand to benefit from different kinds of instruction. The kinds of teaching and support that can help disadvantaged students acquire the skills and knowledge that they did not receive at home are often superfluous or inappropriate for more advantaged children. In this way, gap-closing can transform from a strategy that lifts up the least proficient students into one that slows up the most proficient.

And children who are ready for new intellectual challenges pay a price when they sit in classrooms focused on their less proficient peers. In 2008, Brookings Institution scholar Tom Loveless reported that, while the nation's lowest-achieving students made significant gains in fourth-grade reading and math scores from 2000 to 2007, top students made anemic gains. Loveless found that students who comprised the bottom 10% of achievers saw visible progress in fourth-grade reading and math and eighth-grade math after 2000, but that the performance of students in the top decile barely moved. He concluded, "It would be a mistake to allow the narrowing of test score gaps, although an important accomplishment, to overshadow the languid performance trends of high-achieving students Gaps are narrowing because the gains of low-achieving students are outstripping those of high achievers by a factor of two or three to one."

Loveless's findings echo other research. A 1996 RAND Corporation study found that, when low-achieving students were placed in mixed-ability classrooms, they did about five percentage points better. High-achieving students, however, fared six percentage points *worse* in such classes—and middle-achieving students fared two percentage points worse than they did when placed in "tracked" classes. Weighing these effects out, the authors concluded that switching to mixed-ability classes in math would reduce aggregate achievement by 2%.

There is, of course, the occasional extraordinary teacher who can make heterogeneous classes work for all students. But such teachers are the exception, not the rule. Value-added testing guru Bill Sanders has reported, based on Tennessee achievement data, that high-scoring students

made adequate gains only with the top 20% of teachers. Students at lower achievement levels, however, made progress with all but the least effective teachers. In other words, Sanders's research suggests that teacher quality may matter more for high-performing students than for their peers.

As with so much of the "achievement gap" agenda, mixed-ability instruction is not a bad idea per se. But it does impose costs. The gap-closing gospel holds that there should be no winners and losers in American education, but in practice it simply creates a different set of winners and losers.

THE DELUSION OF RIGOR

The cost of the relentless focus on gap-closing is perhaps most evident when it comes to advanced instruction, particularly Advanced Placement courses. Pressure to close gaps has meant pushing more disadvantaged students into AP courses, even when it has compromised rigor or standards.

Nationally, the number of high-school graduates who had taken at least one AP exam rose from 1 million in 2003 to 1.6 million in 2008. Enthusiasts argue that such expansion entails no downsides, and that enrolling more students in advanced classes doesn't dilute instructional quality. Unfortunately, the nation's AP teachers tell a different story. In a 2009 study, education pollsters Duffett and Farkas noted that just 14% of AP teachers believed that the growth in AP enrollment was caused by growth in the pool of qualified students. Sixty-five percent, meanwhile, said their school's policy was to encourage as many students as possible to take AP courses and exams, regardless of qualification. Indeed, just 29% said their school limited access to AP via prerequisites such as maintaining a minimum grade point average or obtaining teacher approval. Duffett and Farkas reported that this phenomenon was most evident in high-poverty schools, where 34% of AP teachers believed "administrators [were] pushing unqualified minority or low-income students into AP" and 50% said that their African-American and Hispanic students were not adequately prepared for AP instruction.

The result? Fifty-six percent of the AP teachers surveyed said that too many students were in over their heads; 39% reported that the aptitude of AP students and their capacity to do the work had declined, while just 16% said it had improved. And the College Board, the organization that administers the AP program, reports that the share of AP exams

receiving the minimum passing score of 3 or better declined by four percentage points between 2003 and 2008.

This is hardly the first time that well-intentioned efforts to universalize access to high-caliber instruction have had troublesome consequences. American Enterprise Institute scholar Mark Schneider, formerly the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, has concluded that decades of efforts to boost the number of students taking rigorous math classes has caused a substantial dilution of those courses. Schneider has noted that the average number of math credits completed by a high-school graduate rose from 3.2 to 3.8 between 1990 and 2005, and that average math GPAs rose over that time from 2.2 to 2.6. While only a third of students completed algebra II in 1978, more than half did in 2008. And yet NAEP scores for students in algebra I, geometry, and algebra II were higher in 1978 than in 2008. In other words, more students were taking more advanced math and getting better grades—and yet our students knew less in 2008 than they did 30 years earlier. Schneider terms this phenomenon the “delusion of rigor.”

There can be unfortunate, if often unacknowledged, consequences when we seek to universalize excellence. Such efforts can dilute instructional quality, make it tougher for teachers to go as deep or as fast as they otherwise might, and distract attention from advanced students. Given these mixed results, how did the gap-closing gospel become the organizing principle of American schooling?

HOW WE GOT HERE

Historically, there has been a tension between efforts to bolster the performance of elite students and efforts to promote educational equality. Despite cheerful assurances that the two are complementary, the ascendancy of one tends to undermine and distract from the other. For example, the post-Sputnik National Defense Education Act of 1958 made a dramatic investment in high-achieving students in math, science, and language, but overlooked lower-performing students. Concerns about this disparity eventually led to the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965—a law that took the equality agenda of the Great Society and projected it onto America’s K-12 schools.

But the ESEA failed to seriously advance the cause of educational equality. And in the years following its passage, the field of education policy stagnated, largely because of the influence of social scientists and

education leaders convinced that schools could only minimally alter educational outcomes.

This glum view was fostered by sociologist James Coleman's 1966 study examining the first large-scale collection of data on school characteristics and student achievement. The Coleman Report concluded that parents' involvement in their children's lives had a vastly greater effect on achievement and eventual success than schooling did. Coleman's findings were reinforced in the 1970s by sociologist Christopher Jencks and a team at Harvard, who conducted an extensive re-analysis of the data and concluded that the influence of schooling was "marginal." Children, they argued, were affected far more by "what happens at home [and also perhaps] by what happens on the streets and by what they see on television." The outcomes of schooling, Jencks and his team reported, depended almost entirely on "the characteristics of the entering children. Everything else—the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers—is either secondary or completely irrelevant."

These discouraging conclusions set the stage for decades of lackluster education policy, in which educators excused disappointing results by blaming circumstances beyond their control. The result, in the 1980s and then increasingly in the 1990s, was frustration among policymakers and would-be reformers. Reformers on both the left and the right conceded that a child's material, family, and community circumstances surely mattered, but decided to reject outright the notion that zip codes should determine academic success.

These critiques prompted a determination to help schools do a better job of serving students who were too often passed over or ignored. In theory, this should have been a healthy development; in practice, however, a sensible impulse became badly distorted. The result was the No Child Left Behind Act, to which much of today's achievement-gap mania can be traced. It was NCLB, after all, whose very title formally proclaimed the law "[a]n act to close the achievement gap."

To be fair, some reform like the No Child Left Behind Act was probably inevitable. For too long, inadequate instruction in essential skills and abysmal performance by poor, black, and Latino children had been tacitly accepted as the status quo. NCLB was thus largely the product of frustration. It was crafted by Washington policymakers fed up with the seeming refusal of educators to accept responsibility for persistent mediocrity. And in spring 2001, with strong bipartisan support, NCLB

passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 381 to 41 and the Senate by a vote of 87 to 10.

America got the particular reform law that it did, though, because George W. Bush ran in 2000 as a “compassionate conservative.” Eager to showcase his compassion, he drew upon his record as an education reformer in Texas to make the case for educational accountability. But testing, standards, and accountability alone could too easily come across as heartless, especially for a Republican trying to assuage moderate voters. Thus Bush decided to speak not merely of accountability; he also pledged to “leave no child behind.” As Bush strategist Karl Rove explained in his book *Courage and Consequence*: “When Bush said education was the civil rights struggle of our time or that the absence of an accountability system in our schools meant black, brown, poor, and rural children were getting left behind, it gave listeners important information about his respect and concern for every family and deepened the impression that he was a different kind of Republican whom suburban voters . . . could be proud to support.”

That pledge provided much common ground between Bush and congressional warhorses Ted Kennedy (ranking Democrat on the Senate education committee) and George Miller (ranking Democrat on the House education committee). And in negotiations with Kennedy, Miller, and other liberal allies, Bush’s team embraced a bill that featured all kinds of “achievement gap” requirements that had been absent from the president’s original blueprint. They agreed that states would be required to “disaggregate” test scores by race and income, so that schools and districts could be judged on the performance of individual groups. And all parties agreed that school performance should be judged not by how well the schools did as a whole, but rather by achievement on reading and math assessments of the school’s worst-performing demographic “subgroup.” In other words, every public school in America would henceforth be judged primarily on its ability to drive up the reading and math scores of its most disadvantaged students. Indeed, as Bush’s NCLB blueprint proposed, “Sanctions [would] be based on a state’s failure to narrow the achievement gap . . . in math and reading in grades 3 through 8.”

In essence, NCLB was an effort to link “conservative” nostrums of accountability to Great Society notions of “social justice.” The result was a noble exercise hailed for its compassion. The sad truth, however, is that

the whole achievement-gap enterprise has been bad for schooling, bad for most children, and bad for the nation.

A COUNTERPRODUCTIVE CAMPAIGN

At first, it may seem counterintuitive to suggest that a massive, well-intentioned education-reform effort—supported on both sides of the political aisle, by major philanthropic foundations, and by some prominent voices in the civil-rights community—could be anything other than a blessing for American education. And yet five major consequences of NCLB, and of the achievement-gap mania it helped to spawn, demonstrate how this approach has ultimately been harmful to American education.

First, achievement-gap mania has signaled to the vast majority of American parents that school reform isn't about *their* kids. They are now expected to support efforts to close the achievement gap simply because it's "the right thing to do," regardless of the implications for their own children's education. In fact, given that only about one household in five even contains school-age children—and given that two-thirds of families with children do not live in underserved urban neighborhoods, or do not send their kids to public schools, or otherwise do not stand to benefit from the gap-closing agenda—the result is a tiny potential constituency for achievement-gap reform, made up of perhaps 6% or 7% of American households.

Because middle-class parents and suburbanites have no personal stake in the gap-closing enterprise, reforms are tolerated rather than embraced. The most recent annual Gallup poll on attitudes toward schooling reported that just 20% of respondents said "improving the nation's lowest-performing schools" was the most important of the nation's education challenges. Indeed, while just 18% of the public gave American schools overall an A or a B, a sizable majority thought their own elementary and middle schools deserved those high grades. The implication is that most Americans, even those with school-age children, currently see education reform as time and money spent on other people's children. This makes school reform a losing vote for suburban legislators—one that they can take because it's the right thing to do, but that is calculated to burn rather than win political capital. The focus on achievement gaps makes for bad politics by making it hard to build broad, sustained support for reform.

Second, achievement-gap mania has created a dangerous complacency, giving suburban and middle-class Americans the false sense that things are just fine in their own schools. Thus it's no surprise that professionals and suburbanites tend to regard "reforms" — from merit pay to charter schooling — as measures that they'll tolerate as long as they're reserved for urban schools, but that they won't stand for in their own communities. As liberal blogger Matt Yglesias has noted, "Apocalyptic talk about 'failing' schools and intense elite focus on the problems of the least-privileged students tends to obscure the more banal reality that most schools are non-optimal in lots of ways." He elaborates:

An exaggerated view of how terrible "the public schools" are goes hand in hand with exaggerated complacency about one's own local school. If you walked around thinking that the average American male was 5'3" then you'd also walk around thinking that you and your friends and neighbors are really tall. It would actually be more politically useful to have people more focused on the modest but real problems in their own local schools than have them morbidly obsessed with semi-mythical tales of a "broken" school system that they're fortunate not to be stuck in.

The truth is that even the nation's better-performing schools operate under an anachronistic model of schooling that could stand some sensible reforms. And yet because achievement-gap mania has distilled "education reform" to measures that raise the test scores of poor and minority students, the solutions to what ails American education more broadly simply aren't being developed — in part because the question is hardly ever asked.

Gap-closing strategies can be downright unhelpful or counterproductive when it comes to serving most students and families, and so can turn them off to education reform altogether. Longer school years and longer school days can be terrific for disadvantaged students or low achievers, but may be a recipe for backlash if imposed on families who already offer their kids many summer opportunities and extracurricular activities. Policies that seek to shift the "best" teachers to schools and classrooms serving low-achieving children represent a frontal assault on middle-class and affluent families. And responding to such concerns by belittling them is a sure-fire strategy for ensuring that school reform never amounts to

more than a self-righteous crusade at odds with the interests of most middle-class families.

Third, achievement-gap mania has prompted reformers to treat schools as instruments to be used in crafting desired social outcomes, capable of being “fixed” simply through legislative solutions and federal policies. This tendency is hardly surprising, given that most of the thinking about achievement gaps is done in the context not of education reform but of “social justice.” Thus gap-closers approach the challenge not as educators but as social engineers, determined to see schools fix the problems that job-training initiatives, urban redevelopment, income supports, and a slew of other well-intentioned government welfare programs have failed to address.

With the social engineer’s calm assurance that there are clear, identifiable interventions to resolve every problem, today’s education reformers insist that closing the achievement gap is a simple matter of identifying “what works” and then requiring schools to do it. And integral to determining “what works” has been evaluating different strategies in terms of their effects on reading and math scores and graduation rates. This approach has been especially popular when it comes to identifying good teachers. But while the ability to move these scores may be 90% of the job for an elementary-school teacher in Philadelphia or Detroit, it doesn’t necessarily make sense to use these metrics to evaluate teachers in higher-performing schools — where most children easily clear the literacy and numeracy bar, and where parents are more concerned with how well teachers develop their children’s other skills and talents.

Teacher evaluation and pay systems based on gap-closing make little or no allowance for such considerations. One result is that most of the public, rightly or wrongly, puts more stock in its own perceptions than in NCLB-style accountability measurements. For instance, Gallup has reported that, when asked how they would interpret the fact that “large numbers of public schools fail to meet the requirements established by the NCLB law,” just 43% of respondents said they’d blame the public schools for the outcome. Forty-nine percent, meanwhile, said they would be more likely to blame “the law itself.” Thus, in a roundabout way, NCLB has undermined its own legitimacy among the voting public; for this, it has the school-reformers-turned-social-engineers to thank.

Fourth, the achievement-gap mindset stifles innovation. When a nation focuses all its energies on boosting the reading and math scores

of the most vulnerable students, there is neither much cause nor much appetite for developing and pursuing education strategies capable of improving American schools overall.

Consider the case of school choice. Today, for all the vague talk of innovation, charter schools and school vouchers rarely do more than allow poor, urban students to move from unsafe, horrific schools into better conventional-looking schools. The leading brands in charter schooling, for instance, almost uniformly feature traditional classrooms; an extended school day, school year, or both; and a reliance on directive pedagogy attuned to the needs of disadvantaged students. In other words, these are terrific 19th-century schools. One has to search long and hard among the nation's more than 5,000 charter schools to find the handful that are experimenting with labor-saving technologies, technology-infused instruction, or new staffing models better suited to the 21st century.

Furthermore, the intense focus on gap-closing has led to a notion of "innovation" dedicated almost entirely to driving up math and reading scores and graduation rates for low-income and minority students. Promising innovations that promote science, foreign-language learning, or musical instruction have garnered little public investment or acclaim. Even in terms of math and reading, there is not much interest in interventions that do not show up on standardized state assessments. The Obama administration's \$650 million Investing in Innovation Fund—designed to spur investments in innovative educational providers and practices—specified that applicants needed to "demonstrate their previous success in closing achievement gaps, improving student progress toward proficiency, increasing graduation rates, or recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and principals." There is, of course, considerable merit to such a focus. But one undeniable consequence is that it has dramatically narrowed the scope of education research and development—to the inevitable detriment of the nation's schools.

Fifth, in a terrible irony, achievement-gap mania has indirectly made it more difficult for reformers to promote integrated schools. Philanthropic foundations that support education causes are interested in serving as many poor and minority children as possible; when 30% to 40% of a student body is made up of white or affluent students, the school is deemed suspect, as reform-minded foundations see such programs as "wasting" a third of their seats. Bragging rights go to charter schools or programs that have the highest-octane mix of poor and

minority kids. The upshot is that it is terribly difficult to generate interest in nurturing racially or socioeconomically integrated schools, even though just about every observer thinks that more such schools would be good for kids, communities, and the country.

REKINDLING THE DEBATE

Perhaps the greatest irony surrounding achievement-gap mania is that, for a reform approach ultimately rooted in a moral claim, its moral philosophy is not all that compelling.

If anyone could be considered the patron saint of gap-closing, it is 20th-century philosopher John Rawls. Rawls authored the landmark treatise *A Theory of Justice*, which argued that a just society should ensure, according to the “difference principle,” that any social and economic inequalities are arranged for the benefit of society’s least advantaged group. This would seem to be a clear justification for shortchanging most students in order to focus on those at the bottom.

And yet even Rawls’s view was far more nuanced than that of today’s gap-closers. Indeed, Rawls cautioned:

Now the difference principle . . . does not require society to try to even out handicaps as if all were expected to compete on a fair basis in the same race. But the difference principle would allocate resources in education, say, so as to improve the long-term expectation of the least favored. If this end is attained by giving more attention to the better endowed, it is permissible; otherwise not.

It would be comforting if gap-closers even occasionally took seriously Rawls’s warning that “it is not in general to the advantage of the less fortunate to propose policies which reduce the talents of others.” Instead, they dismiss such concerns with moral indignation or specious claims that their preferred remedies entail no tradeoffs. In doing so, they duck the unpleasant reality that we cannot do everything: Doubling down on one area of education reform inevitably means easing up somewhere else.

All children in a free nation have a moral claim to attend schools that will help them discover and develop their gifts. And while difficult choices must always be made, we should be wary of shaping schools in ways that explicitly favor some of our children while shortchanging others. It is long past time for a more mature approach to education

reform — one that recognizes that there are no silver bullets or one-size-fits-all solutions, and that fixing what ails America's schools will not always be easy or obvious. Decisions about how much to focus on this child versus that child *should* be painful enough that we don't make them cavalierly. And in making these difficult decisions, responsible people of good faith can and will disagree.

The problem with achievement-gap mania is not that it is necessarily wrong; the problem is that its self-confident purveyors have been uniformly uninterested in the cost, complications, or consequences of their crusade. The result has been to effectively stifle debate, alienate most parents from the school-reform agenda, and insist that a flawed, mechanistic vision of schooling ought to steer our course in the 21st century.

The response to this problem cannot be to dispute the moral claims of our most vulnerable children. Rather, the solution is to ensure that these claims are placed in their proper context — weighed against the competing claims of other children and of society at large. The obligation of serious reformers, then, is to rekindle the debate. They have a responsibility to help lawmakers, educators, and foundations understand that, while achievement gaps are important, they are just one challenge in a vast education landscape. Reformers must insist that the demands of gap-closing crusaders be subjected to rigorous, careful scrutiny. And they must re-open the world of education policy to fresh ways of envisioning what American schooling can be.

Only then will we be able to move beyond No Child Left Behind and the frustrations and failures that have followed. In the end, deciding that school is the place where we teach poor children to read and do math — and that everyone else will be left alone to figure out the rest — seems an impoverished and ultimately self-defeating agenda for education reform in the 21st century.