

Interview questions with Greg Duncan & Richard Murnane

authors of

Restoring Opportunity The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education

Introductory questions

As you write in your book, “Americans want to believe that ours is a land of opportunity, where no matter what a person’s starting point, those who work hard—and their kids—can ‘make it.’” [p. 1] And indeed, for much of the twentieth century, economic growth made that dream a reality for generations of Americans. What started to change during the 1970s?

We live in communities increasingly segregated by class. How do class-stratified residential patterns influence students’ learning and educational achievement?

Historically, this country has relied on its public schools to help level the playing field for children born into different circumstances. But, you suggest, those schools are no longer able to ameliorate the effects of inequality—and may inadvertently be exacerbating them. Tell us more.

Discussions of school reforms often center on simplistic “silver bullets”—more money, more accountability, more choice, new organizational structures. Yet, you maintain, none of these reforms has turned the tide. Why?

On economic inequality as it impacts education

What did the job market look like for a high school graduate in 1972? Describe the “perfect storm” that sunk the labor prospects of workers who did not have higher education.

We’ve heard a bit about “degree inflation,” employers requiring college degrees for jobs that used to require only a high school diploma. But you point out that these same jobs, secretarial, for example, have changed and that employers have good reasons to look for more highly educated candidates. Tell us more.

You link technological change and globalization over the past 40 years to challenges for America’s public schools. How does that work?

We often hear criticism of programs that simply “throw money at the problem.” Why are your calls for increased public spending on education any different?

You present evidence from a few well-designed and well-executed studies that suggest that money alone, when given directly to low-income families, can make a difference for their children. How?

What did researchers learn by taking blood samples of a mother receiving increased income via the Earned Income Tax Credit? By how many points did achievement test scores rise in children who had benefited from a \$3,000 increase in annual family income?

Supporting Educators

What's wrong with teachers using the same methods in the classroom by which they themselves were taught?

Teachers, you write, "do not start out effective" rather, they "become more effective during their first years in the classroom." [p 49] What are some of the many reasons that economically disadvantaged students are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers? How might we retain experienced teachers in low-income schools?

A pre-K classroom in America's first free public elementary school

On one of your visits to Boston's Mather Elementary School in Dorchester, you observed an experienced African American teacher, Karla Settles, reading *The Little Red Hen Makes a Pizza* to her class of four-year olds. What was special about this pre-school activity?

How are the *Little Red Hen* activities taking advantage of what we've been learning from emerging neuroscience information about early childhood brain "architecture"?

Ms. Settles did not just make this up. Where did the curriculum for the *Little Red Hen* module come from? How about those plastic veggies for the pretend pizza?

One of the innovations of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" (announced in January 1964) was the Head Start program. Decades later, the program remains controversial. Does it live up to its name? What does research suggest about Head Start vs. pre-Kindergarten programs?

The Boston Public Schools (BPS) face the same challenges as other urban districts in the United States. Three-quarters of students come from low-income families. As four-year-olds, the children from low-income families have academic skills that lag far behind those of the relatively few children from more affluent families who attend BPS schools. What has Boston done to address this crisis? How does a common curriculum figure into the remedy?

An elementary school that works - North Kenwood/Oakland campus of the University of Chicago Charter School

How does third-grade teacher Sarah Nowak train her students to find a "just right" book to read using the "five finger" method?

Some critics of allowing children to choose the books they want to read argue that all children should focus on grade-appropriate texts. What is your response to this argument?

How does this school avoid the trap of having teachers' compensate for lack of time during the workweek by working nights, weekends and holidays?

What else can we learn from the University of Chicago Charter School Network that might inform comprehensive school reform design?

Small high school of choice in the South Bronx and Brooklyn

We hear about schools in low-income neighborhoods that somehow “beat the odds.” But Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School and the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice are not flukes, are they?

In what ways are these schools imbedded in their communities, and what real difference does that make?

How does the design of students’ high school experiences sometimes overlook what we have learned about adolescence as a developmental stage? How do traditional classroom activities interfere with some of the emotional and educational needs of urban, low-income adolescents?

At the School for Law and Justice, all students in an English class study and discuss the same texts, regardless of reading ability. How do teachers handle student’s different literacy skills?

New York State has fairly rigorous requirements, including Regent’s exams, for high school graduation. Is this a good thing?

Most low-income students do not attend high schools that offer the personalized attention, academic rigor, and the abundant learning opportunities that the small high schools that you describe offer. If we had the political will to create high schools like these across the nation, what lessons about improving the life chances of low-income teen-agers might we take from the New York City decade-long experience with small schools of choice?

Supporting Families

New Hope was an experimental program that operated in the mid- to late-1990s in Milwaukee. You describe it as a “social contract rather than a welfare program.” [p. 110]. How did it work? Why was offering a choice of benefits so important to its success?

Researchers tracked the families enrolled in the programs for several years. What did they learn? Why do you think the impacts for boys were more significant than those for girls?

How does one determine the societal benefits of programs such as New Hope when trying to calculate the costs and benefits of a social investment?

Building Blocks for improving the life chances of low-income children

Forty-five states have now adopted the “Common Core Standards,” which outline skills in English language arts and mathematics that students are expected to master at each grade level. Why do you think that is a good thing?

What kinds of supports do schools need in order to prepare students to meet these academic standards? Are they getting them?

Over the last twenty years, it has come to be almost universally accepted that schools should be judged by their effectiveness in educating students. If not for high-stakes testing, how can one evaluate the efficacy of any educational program?

Can the nation's schools meet the challenge of providing all students with the skills they will need to thrive in a rapidly changing economy? What would it take?