

Getting Smarter, Becoming Fairer

A Progressive Education Agenda for a Stronger Nation

American students coming of age in the 21st century are challenged as never before. They live in a world that is roiled by seismic economic, cultural, and demographic shifts. They face a future of rapid change and relentless competition. New skills and new ways of using these skills are imperatives if succeeding generations of Americans are to thrive in a world that is increasingly global and complex.

America's education system faces the twin challenges of raising the bar overall and closing the learning gaps among its students. Far too many of our students are not prepared to succeed in an increasingly competitive world. Those who have historically received less support—students who are African-American, Latino, and Native American; from immigrant families whose first language is not English; or from low-income and undereducated families—not surprisingly, are farthest behind.

These students are too often cut off from the American dream that hard work and education will lead to a good life. Students from these backgrounds are growing as a proportion of our population. Indeed, in this century, they will become our new majority. They are the workforce, the community leaders, and the voters of the future. Whether they will be the kinds of citizens that democracy demands – productive, engaged, critical, energetic, and free – depends on the education they receive and their own academic achievement.

America's education system must truly become first in the world if its prosperous democracy is to thrive in the 21st century. To accomplish this, the education agenda for the next 10 years must be aggressive, comprehensive, and focused on closing learning gaps among our own students and with students worldwide. We must abandon 19th and 20th century models and do things in radically different ways, always placing the needs of students first. We must address, simultaneously, multiple shortcomings within our educational system by:

1. Increasing learning time
 - through better use and extension of our school days;
 - by starting younger so every child enters school ready to learn; and
 - by preparing all high-school students for higher education and connecting them to affordable post-secondary opportunities.

Then we must assure high quality in these uses of learning time by:

2. Promoting high expectations, voluntary national standards, and accountability for all students learning;
3. Recruiting, preparing, rewarding and equitably deploying high-quality teachers and school leaders; and
4. Establishing stronger connections between schools and families and communities.

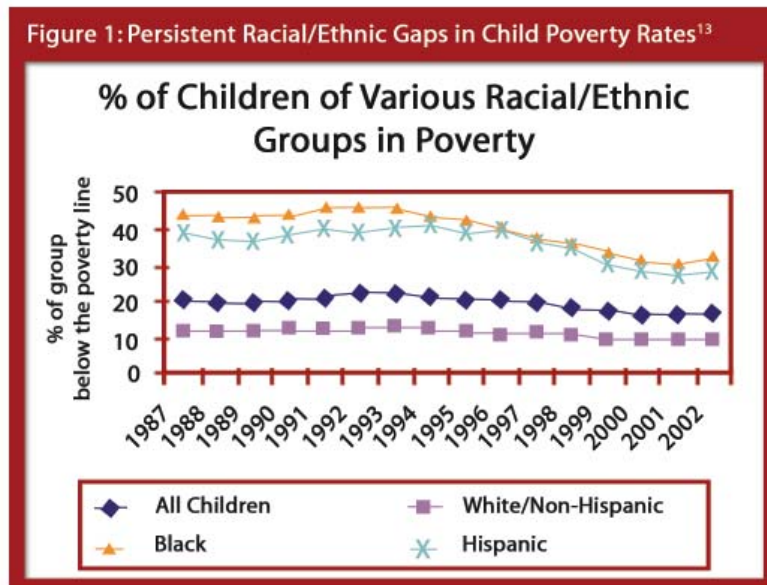
Great Divides

The United States is both the world's largest economy¹⁰ and the industrialized nation in which wealth is distributed the most unevenly.¹¹ More than 40 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and President Johnson's declaration of a war on poverty, stark gaps between the "haves" and "have-nots" in our society continue to exist on almost every measure of health, income and achievement. Many tolerate this poverty amidst prosperity because they assume that all citizens are afforded equal opportunities for creating good lives for themselves and their families. They believe it doesn't matter in the long run whether one is born the son of a custodian or the daughter of a CEO; everyone has a fair shot at success through hard work and education. For some, this is true. But the sad reality is that, for many, the deck is stacked against them from the beginning. Today,

those starting the race with their shoes tied together receive little meaningful help from an education system ill-equipped to give them the skills they need to take advantage of America's opportunities. For these children, the American dream seems to be slipping away. Their chances of achieving a middle-class lifestyle are worsening while the gaps between the rich and the poor are widening.

Gaps in Well-Being

Over the last three decades, America's labor market has evolved into a two-tiered system. Those with the right education, skills and connections reap a growing share of the economy's rewards, while the rest toil in jobs where wages aren't keeping up, and health and retirement benefits are increasingly rare. Today, American CEOs earn 185 times what the typical U.S. worker makes, up from a 26:1 ratio in 1965.¹² This era of progress for those



¹⁰ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database* (Washington, DC, April 2005) Available at: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2005/01/data/index.htm>.

¹¹ Sylvia Allegretto, Jared Bernstein and Lawrence Mishel, *The State of Working America 2004/2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements*, 2004. Available at: <http://www.childstats.gov/ac2004/tables/econ1a.asp>

at the top of the earnings ladder has been one of stagnation for most at the bottom. The share of Americans living below the federal poverty line stood at 11.3% in 2003, just about the same as it was 30 years earlier (11.1%).¹⁴

Children are hit especially hard by these trends, as they are more likely than the rest of society to live in poverty. Further, African-American and Hispanic children are disproportionately represented among the poor. In the last year for which data were available, nearly one in three African-American children and more than one in four Hispanic children were living in poverty, compared to one in eleven white children.¹⁵ (See Figure 1.)

Although poverty is often portrayed as an inner-city phenomenon, the poor are nearly as likely to be rural as they are to be urban. About 17.5% of the inner-city population and 14.5% of the rural population were living below the poverty line in 2003, compared to 9% of those living in the suburbs.¹⁶ Geographic segregation means that the lives of the rich and poor only sporadically intersect, making it easy to ignore what goes unseen.

Life in communities where low-income families and families of color often make their homes entails a set of unique obstacles to achieving the American dream. Unemployment is higher than average and violence is all too prevalent, with African-Americans both disproportionately likely to be the victims of violent crimes as well as to be found guilty of committing them.¹⁷ Access to health care is inadequate, while some diseases and medical conditions, like asthma, diabetes and lead poisoning, are more prevalent.¹⁸ And single parenthood is more common, which in turn contributes to the cycle of poverty by leaving children largely dependent on the financial and emotional support of only one, often young, adult.¹⁹

Certainly, important progress has been made. More African-Americans and Latinos count themselves among the ranks of the middle class than ever before. But moving from the bottom to the top of the income ladder is becoming more of a challenge. One study by the Economic Policy Institute shows that of those who started out in the lowest income quintile in the late 1980s, more than half (53%) were still in that same low-earning group in the late 1990s. Another 24% had managed to move

¹⁴ Sylvia Allegretto, Jared Bernstein and Lawrence Mishel, *The State of Working America 2004/2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Robert J. Mills and Bernadette D. Proctor, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the U.S.: 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p60-226.pdf>

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin: Prisoners in 2003*, 2004. Available at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p03.pdf>; and U.S. Department of Justice, *Key Facts at a Glance: Serious Violent Victimization Rates by Race, 1973-2003*, 2004. Available at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/racetab.htm>

¹⁸ Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Robert J. Mills and Bernadette D. Proctor, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the U.S.: 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p60-226.pdf>; and Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Children: National Health Interview Survey," *Vital and Health Statistics*, Series 10, Number 221, 2004. Available at: http://198.246.96.2/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_221.pdf

¹⁹ Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Robert J. Mills and Bernadette D. Proctor, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the U.S.: 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p60-226.pdf>

up by one quintile, meaning that a total of 77% of those who started at the lowest end of the income scale were still on the low end of the scale a decade later.²⁰

There have been times in our nation's history when the great divide between "haves" and "have-nots" became too much for individuals to bear. Resentment and frustration welled up into violence, and riots made the nightly news. Without hope, equity and true educational and economic opportunity, there is no guarantee that those turbulent times are largely a thing of the past. The strong and persistent connection between race, ethnicity and income, on the one hand, and so many measures of well-being, on the other, should serve as a warning sign to all as we enter an era in which today's minority populations will become the majority. More must be done to deliver on the promise of equal opportunity and justice for all.

A Demographically Changing America

Though America has long been a nation of newcomers, the United States is today in the midst of an epic immigration wave. Its foreign-born population now numbers 33.5 million and, at 11.7%, represents only a slightly smaller share of the overall population than it did during our last great immigration boom a century ago.²¹ Unlike the immigrants who came from Europe 100 years ago, most of today's immigrants are making their way here from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This swelling surge of

immigration carries profound implications and opportunities for America today and will shape the nation's demographics for decades.

By 2050, this influx of immigrants, coupled with demographic changes among current citizens, will produce an America that is comprised evenly of whites and people of color.²² After that, we will become a society with no single racial or ethnic group comprising the bulk of the population. This shift will be felt not only in the historically diverse immigrant gateway cities of New York, Miami, Phoenix, and Los Angeles, but also in plains states, such as Iowa and Nebraska, and some southern states, such as Georgia and North Carolina, that are reemerging as the destination of many immigrants.

Racial and ethnic diversity is and will continue to be unevenly distributed throughout the United States. The southern half of the country – from coast to coast – will be much more racially/ethnically mixed than the northern half, largely due to growth in the Latino population. Latinos will be the largest minority group in the Southwest, and African-Americans will be the largest minority group in most of the Southeast.

This significant population shift is already being felt differently in various places (e.g. Somalis in Vermont, Hmong in Minneapolis, Mexicans in North Carolina), but make no mistake – it will be felt first in our schools.

²⁰ Sylvia Allegretto, Jared Bernstein and Lawrence Mishel, *The State of Working America 2004/2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²¹ Luke Larsen, *The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-551.pdf>

²² U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Interim Projections By Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) Available at: <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/natprojtab01a.pdf>

The New Face of Immigration

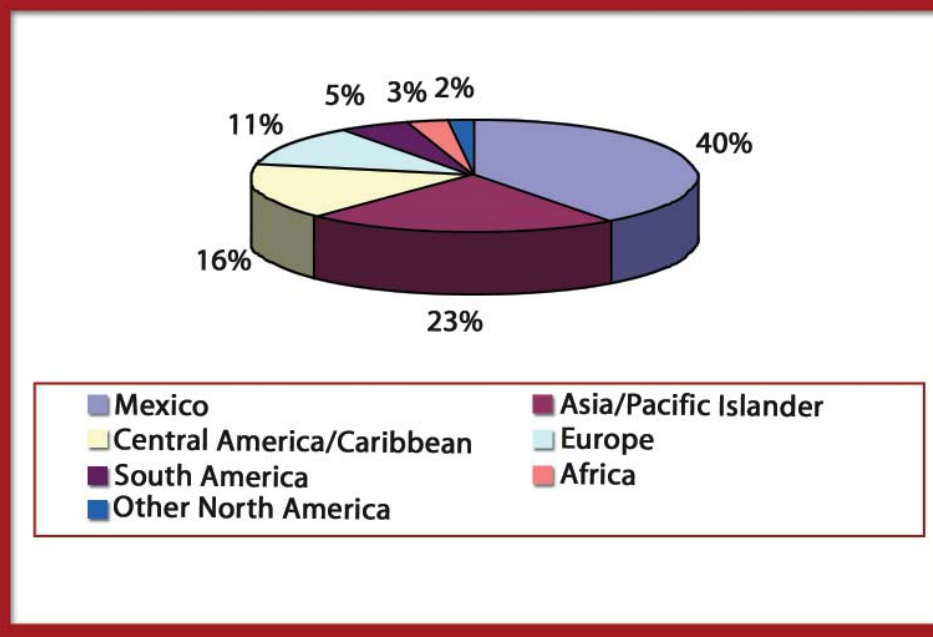
The Children of Immigrants

- 1 in 5 children in the United States is the son or daughter of an immigrant
- 4 in 5 children of immigrants are U.S. citizens
- By 2015, 1 of every 3 school-age U.S. children is projected to be the son or daughter of an immigrant
- The majority of school-aged English language learners live in the West

Language Use in the U.S.

- 18% of children in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home
- 72% of children in immigrant families speak a language other than English at home
- Spanish was the most common language for those who were not native English speakers. 71% of all people, regardless of age, whose primary language wasn't English were Spanish-speakers
- 26% of immigrant children live in linguistically isolated households, meaning that no one over the age of 14 has a strong command of the English language
- In 1999, 74% of Hispanics aged 5-24 spoke a language other than English at home
- In 1999, 60% of Asian/Pacific Islanders aged 5-24 spoke a language other than English at home
- In 1999, 63% of English language learners aged 5-24 were U.S.-born

Children of Immigrants by Region of Origin, 2000



Information here is from:

Richard Behrman and Margie Shields, "Children of Immigrant Families: Analysis and Recommendations," *The Future of Children*, vol. 14, no. 2, Summer 2004. Available at: http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/Vol_14_No2_no_photos.pdf

Steven Klein, et al., *Language Minorities and Their Educational and Labor Market Indicators – Recent Trends: Statistical Analysis Report* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004009.pdf>

Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, *Immigration – Trends and Implications for Schools* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003). Available at: <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410654>

Already, one in every five children in the United States is the son or daughter of an immigrant;²³ by 2015, that figure is expected to rise to include one in every three school-age children.²⁴ Educating immigrant children has long been par for the course in places like New York and California, but as the scope of immigration expands, many more states and schools will count themselves among those responsible for

If a meritocracy such as ours truly reveres equality of opportunity and rewards tenacity and talent, as it claims, then schools should serve to equip all children with the skills and knowledge necessary to propel them as far as they can go.

teaching newcomers. Nebraska, for example, recently reported that the number of students speaking limited English jumped 320% over the last decade (from 3,714 in 1993-94 to 15,586 in the 2003-04 school year).²⁵

Such trends show no sign of abating,

and schools will increasingly be called upon to embrace the diversity of their student population, use this diversity as an asset, and reach out to students' families to ensure that these children become fully equipped to participate in American civic life and the global economy. As a nation we need to capitalize on the gifts of capacity and human resources that new immigrants bring – their energy, love of freedom, and aspirations to make a better life in their new home.

Education Achievement Gaps

Despite our nation's deep divisions, the mere hope of prosperity and well-being continues to loom large in the hearts and minds of most Americans. Indeed, opportunity, security and freedom continue to beckon immigrants from across the globe. Hard work, commitment, ingenuity and, at times, luck are all critical components of achieving this dream, but in the 21st century, one more essential element plays an important role – a high-quality education. If a meritocracy such as ours truly reveres equality of opportunity and rewards tenacity and talent, as it claims, then schools should serve to equip all children with the skills and knowledge necessary to propel them as far as they can go. Absent an effective education system that is equally accessible to all, the American dream is rendered a meaningless metaphor; it only serves to elevate hopes and ultimately to engender disappointment and alienation.

The high-quality schools that are such an integral ingredient in the American dream have too often been missing in the lives of low-income, minority, and immigrant children. These children are more likely to have inexperienced, inadequately prepared teachers than are their white and middle- and upper-income peers. They often confront dilapidated school facilities, dated and insufficient materials, and fewer resources than those who live in affluent areas. Not surprisingly, the end result is significant disparities in academic achievement (shown in Figure 2) that surface relatively early in students' educational careers and persist throughout them.

²³ Richard Behrman and Margie Shields, "Children of Immigrant Families: Analysis and Recommendations," *The Future of Children*, vol. 14, no. 2, Summer 2004. Available at: http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/Vol_14_No2_no_photos.pdf

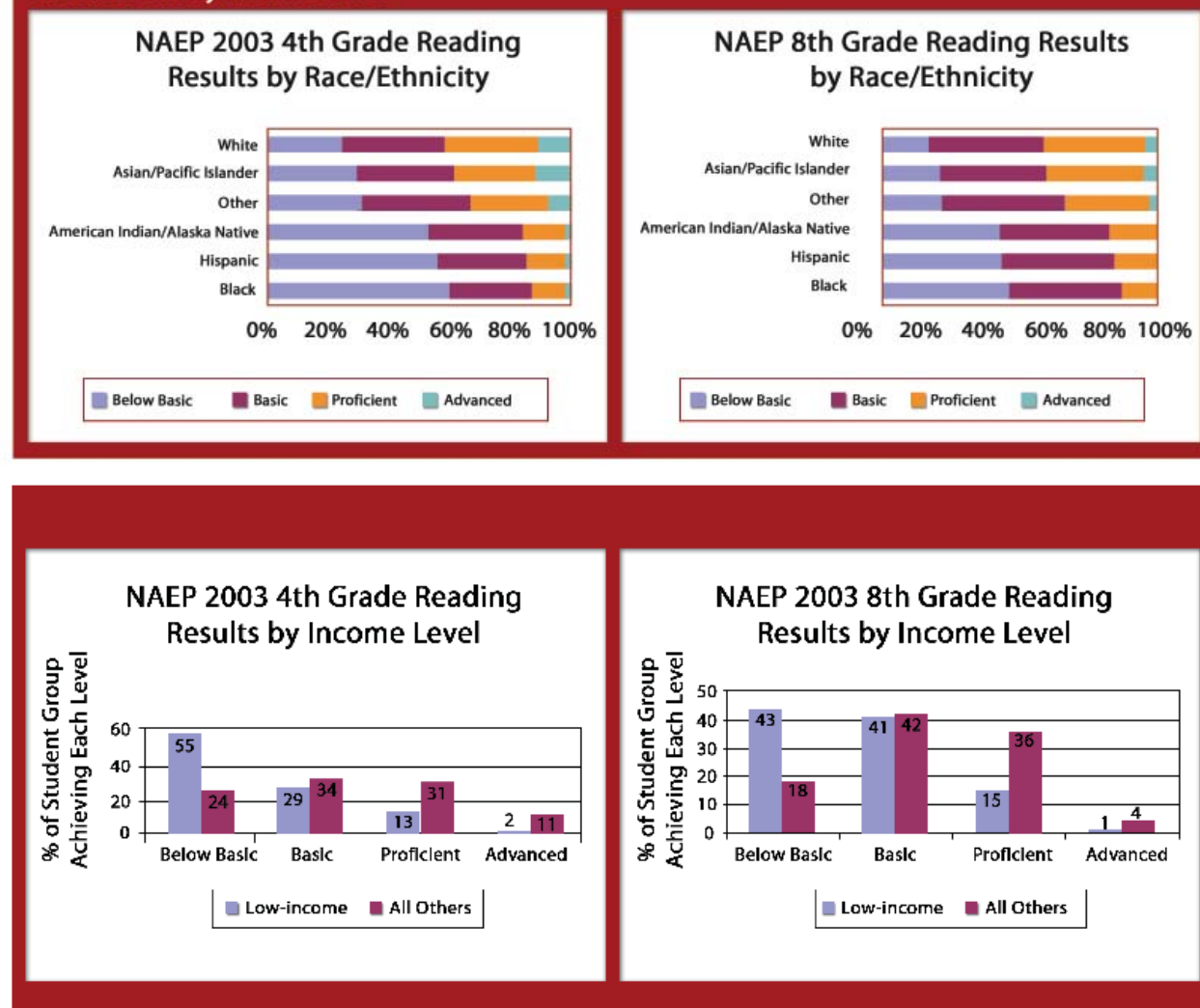
²⁴ Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, *Immigration – Trends and Implications for Schools* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003). Available at: <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410654>

²⁵ Mary Ann Zehr, "Newcomers Bring Change, Challenge to Region," *Education Week*, May 4, 2005.

These disparities are only magnified as children reach adulthood. Tragically, too many of these students don't complete high school,

much less pursue post-secondary education. Only 71% of students who begin high school across the nation actually receive a diploma

Figure 2: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Scores by Race/Ethnicity and Income²⁶



²⁶ *The Nation's Report Card: National Subgroup Results* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Nov. 2003). Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/results2003/natsubgroups.asp>

A project of the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an ongoing nationally representative indicator of what students know and can do across a range of academic subjects. NAEP includes two components – the main assessments, which are periodically updated to reflect current curriculum policies, content and techniques of educational measurements, and the long-term trend assessments, which use substantially the same tests year after year in order to measure the progress of the nation's students over several decades. Figure 2 and Figure 9 in this report refer to results from the most recently available main assessment. Figure 8, which looks at the achievement gap over time, refers to the most recent long-term assessment.

in four years.²⁷ As troubling as this number is, some areas of the country fare even worse. In South Carolina, 53% of all students who begin high school finish it;²⁸ in Detroit, the estimate is 57%.²⁹ Students who fail to complete high school are disproportionately from low-income and/or minority families. While 22% of white students do not complete high school, 44% of African-American students and 48% of Latino students drop out.³⁰ Theirs is a dream denied.

It would be wrong and unfair to assume that the reason for these students' poor achievement lies largely within them. Numerous examples illustrate how such children can and do thrive when they are in student-centered educational environments and are taught rigorous and engaging curricula by knowledgeable, well-prepared and committed instructors. At Atlanta's West Manor Elementary School, for example, the student population is almost entirely African-American and 62.5% low-income. In 2003, 93% of the school's 4th graders were proficient in reading, and 89% achieved proficiency in math.³¹ And at Oneida Elementary School in rural Kentucky, more than 85% of students achieved proficiency in math and reading, despite the fact that 77% of students come from economically disadvantaged families.³² Success is possible,

given the right environment and supports. No child enters school hoping to fail; it is the school system and political leaders that fail the child.

It has been demonstrated time and again that those who have access to a high-quality education and, in particular, reach some level of post-secondary schooling, are most likely to succeed. However, when schools fail to prepare students to become engaged citizens, productive workers and lifelong learners, students are left with little but forsaken aspirations and foreclosed opportunities.

Decades ago, the availability of well-paying manufacturing jobs paved a pathway for high-school dropouts to achieve a middle-class lifestyle. In the 21st century knowledge economy, however, Americans without high-school diplomas earn lower wages (see Figure 3), face a greater risk of unemployment, and wind up in prison more often³³ than those with higher levels of education. The prevalence of these problems is approaching crisis levels in some communities, and particularly among young black men. Today, nearly one in eleven African-American males between the ages of 25 and 29 is in prison, a fact which carries tragic repercussions not only for them but also for their families and communities.³⁴

²⁷ Jay Greene and Marcus A. Winters, *Public High-School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991-2002* (New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2005). Available at: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp_08.pdf

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jay Greene, *High School Graduation Rates in the United States* (New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2001). Available at: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm

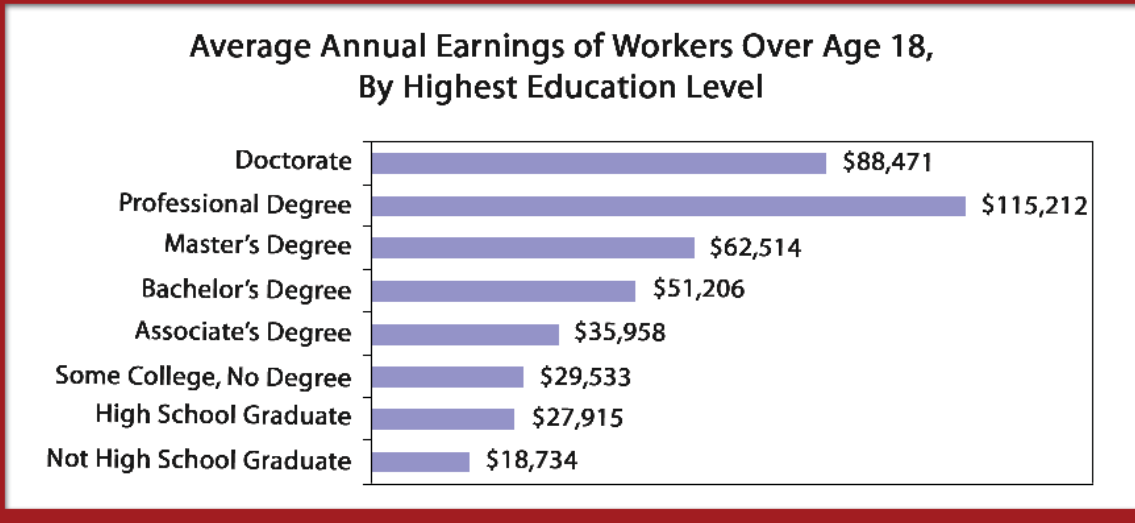
³⁰ Jay Greene and Marcus A. Winters, *High-School Graduation and College Readiness Rates: 1991-2002* (New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2005). Available at: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp_08.pdf

³¹ GreatSchools.net, *West Manor Elementary School*. Available at: <http://www.greatschools.net/>

³² SchoolMatters.com, *Oneida Elementary School*. Available at: <http://www.schoolmatters.com/>

³³ Caroline Wolf Harlow, "Education and Correctional Populations" (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). Available at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>

³⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin: Prisoners in 2003, 2004*. Available at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p03.pdf>

Figure 3: The Connection Between Education and Earnings³⁵

Our schools' inability to offer every student real educational opportunity and a fair chance to succeed leaves a legacy that resonates through generations, as children of poorly educated parents tend to lag their peers academically. In the aggregate, this represents a systemic societal failure that presents a direct threat to our nation's strength and viability. The demographic changes of the 21st century will magnify our society's challenges and render them more visible than ever before. Global economic competition, the likes of which we have not previously experienced, is already beginning to exact a brutal toll for this cycle of low expectations, little support, and worsening outcomes.

Securing Our Prosperous Democracy

Today, the United States economy, which supports and sustains our democracy, is under persistent and unremitting pressure from places that are eagerly developing their human capital in order to become more productive, to transform their societies, and to compete on the world stage.

- Real growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in China has averaged almost 10% annually for the past two decades, far surpassing any other major economy over that span.³⁶ If current trends continue,

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2004*, Table 9, 2005. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2004.html>

It is important to note that differences in income do not reflect an unwillingness to work among those with lower levels of educational attainment. A review of the working poor, defined as having incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty line or \$38,700 for a family of four in 2005, revealed that they work virtually the same number of hours as those in non-poor families – the primary earner in working poor families works on average 2,080 hours per year and among non-poor families he or she works 2,184 hours. (Gregory Acs, Katherin Ross Phillips and Daniel McKenzie, *Playing by the Rules But Losing the Game: America's Working Poor*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2002.) The commitment to work among lower-income workers matches that of middle- and upper-income workers; education makes a crucial difference in how much committed workers earn.

³⁶ David Cohen, "Scrutinizing China's Every Move," *Business Week*, Nov. 19, 2004. Available at: http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/nov2004/nf2004119_0024_db039.htm

China will have the third-largest GDP in the world by 2020.³⁷ By 2050, the three largest economies in terms of GDP are likely to be China, the United States, and India (in that order).³⁸

- In the United States itself, which characteristically values and rewards industriousness and inventiveness, non-citizens are gaining increasing recognition for innovation. Nearly half (47%) of patents granted by the U.S. Patent and Trade Office in 2000, the latest year for which this information is available, went to foreign inventors. American citizens received a slight majority of patents; the second-largest number was awarded to Japanese citizens. While Chinese and Indian citizens comprise a relatively small segment of all patent recipients, each nation has more than tripled its share of United States patents since 1991.³⁹
- Only 1.6% of 24-year-olds in the United States have a bachelor's degree in engineering, compared to figures roughly two times higher in Russia, three times higher in China, and four times higher in South Korea and Japan.⁴⁰
- The number of American engineering graduates peaked in 1985 and is presently

down 20% from that level; the percentage of United States undergraduates taking engineering is the second lowest of all developed countries.⁴¹

Some will say that we have heard similar warnings before and managed to thrive with only marginal modifications to our schools. This is true. America's economy has excelled in recent decades in spite of, rather than thanks to, our uneven educational performance. Rather than upgrading the educational system which incubates the nation's intellectual capital, we have coasted by on the advantages of sheer size, flexible labor markets, and immigration policies which allowed us to skim off the cream of the world's human capital. But our longstanding edge is rapidly eroding as China, India, and other nations compete more effectively to develop their own human capital and economic advantage.

We can no longer dismiss these trends as simply the result of large populations working for low wages or isolated nations opening heretofore inaccessible markets. The jobs being outsourced to workers in these and other nations, in many instances from the United States, are no longer limited to low-skill, low-wage professions, but now also include sizable numbers of jobs requiring significant skills and education, such as those in the engineering,

³⁷ Augusto Lopez-Claros, *Global Competitiveness Report 2004-5* (Geneva: Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2004). Available at: http://www.weforum.org/pdf/Gcr/Executive_Summary_GCR_04. See also Richard N. Cooper, "A Glimpse of 2020" (Harvard University, Massachusetts). Available at: <http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/cooper/papers/A%20Glimpse%20of%202020.pdf>.

³⁸ Roopa Purushothaman and Dominic Wilson, *Dreaming With the BRICs: The Path to 2050* (New York, NY: Goldman Sachs, 2003). Available at: <http://www.gs.com/insight/research/reports/99.pdf>

³⁹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Compendium of Patent Statistics* (Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/24/8208325.pdf>

⁴⁰ Craig Barrett, "The Next Economy," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. /Dec. 2004. Available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2663

⁴¹ National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2004). Available at: <http://www.foia.cia.gov/2020/2020.pdf>

information technology and healthcare fields.⁴² This movement is accelerating; in 2003, the most recent year for which data is available, China surpassed the United States as the world's foremost recipient of foreign direct investment.⁴³

But increased economic competition is not just coming from "emerging" nations. Europe and Japan are transforming their domestic industries and making their markets more attractive to foreign investors while our post-9/11 restrictions on immigration, coupled with the increasingly attractive job opportunities in other nations, reduce our ability to recruit top-quality talent from overseas.⁴⁴ To ignore these warnings once was foolish. To do so again is to tempt fate.

America has more than simply jobs at stake. In the United States, a vibrant democracy and a powerful economy are inextricably linked. Our economy has buoyed our democratic traditions, and these traditions have in turn bolstered our economy. Today, this powerful and productive interplay is at risk, and our security, about which we are so rightly concerned, is threatened along with it.

Our outmoded system of education is steadily eroding those strengths, with the same effect over time as a military defeat: narrow life chances, constricted economic conditions and a growing cynicism that infects and poisons civic life. The effect may seem slow and

incremental at first, but the long-term impact will not be.

It will be all the more painful and inexcusable because we have had full warning of the threat and its consequences. Almost a quarter of a century has passed since the National Commission on Excellence in Education told us that continuing

neglect of our educational system was akin to "committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."⁴⁵ We like to think that we have engaged in serious educational reform since then. But, to date, we have made mostly cosmetic changes and tinkered at the margins. International statistics show the results of these meager efforts:

- In the most recent results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests the reading and math skills of 15-year-olds in a large group of industrialized nations and a smaller group of developing countries, the United States ranked 24th out of 29 nations in math literacy.

In the United States, a vibrant democracy and a powerful economy are inextricably linked. Today, this powerful and productive interplay is at risk, and our security, about which we are so rightly concerned, is threatened along with it.

⁴² Andrew Pollack, "Medical Companies Join the Trend to Outsourcing," *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2005, A1.

⁴³ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Trends and Recent Developments in Foreign Direct Investment* (Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), 2004. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/39/32230032.pdf>

⁴⁴ Anthony Carnevale, "Education and the Economy: If We're So Dumb, Why Are We So Rich?" *Education Week*, Feb. 2, 2005.

⁴⁵ National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, April 1983. Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>

- On the same assessment, the problem-solving abilities of Americans were no better. The United States again ranked 24th out of 29 nations.⁴⁶
- The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) shows that American 4th graders did somewhat better than their older peers did on PISA. The United States ranked 12th out of 25 industrialized and developing countries participating in the study.
- Eighth graders in the United States also scored above the international average in mathematics on the TIMSS, but their rank slipped to 20th out of 45 nations in that category.
- The United States, which once led the world in higher education graduates, is now second (at 38%) behind Canada (at 43%) among all Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations in terms of the percentage of the 25- to 64-year-old population that has attained either a two-year or four-year post-secondary credential.⁴⁷ In addition, Australia, Finland, Iceland, Poland and Sweden now boast higher post-secondary entry rates than the U.S.⁴⁸

We can continue to pursue our current course and slowly relinquish the benefits and advantages of our past successes. But the cost of this inertia will be high, widespread and marked by recrimination and resentment that

will further weaken us. We can assign blame or we can respond in new ways.

The future of our country demands that we choose the latter. Our first response must be to build an education system that is second to none. Previous efforts at improving education have been intermittent and piecemeal, and we have shirked the hard, long and collective responsibility of completely overhauling an education system that has been in decline for decades. Often our promises go unrealized. As a result, we have many times been left to wonder why we have not seen the range of results that is needed. We have substituted slogans for substance and replaced resources with rhetoric. So far, the 20-year conversation about improving education has not yielded true progress. To get ahead, we must be smarter, more honest, and more determined about improving education; only then will our students be smarter, too.

A Progressive Agenda

Education in America must be modernized for all students. If we don't make simultaneous, even radical, changes, the American education system will end up with inadequate results for most students, even for those from advantaged groups. As a nation we have conquered serious challenges in the past, and we are convinced we can do so again.

This report is about what we need to do to get smarter. It argues that we must build a new, comprehensive model of public education, one

⁴⁶ Sean Cavanagh and Erik W. Robelen, "U.S. Students Fare Poorly in International Math Comparison," *Education Week*, Dec. 7, 2004.

⁴⁷ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2004, U.S. Country Report* (Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/55/33714494.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

that begins at birth and continues through post-secondary study. This approach focuses on the needs and interests of all students, rather than on the preferences of some adults, and builds upon the best and most promising educational practices. It advocates new thinking about education that seeks to foster success for each individual, contributing to a nation that is economically, socially, and intellectually prepared to lead.

We must prepare students for the 21st century, a time in which the basic skills and credentials necessary to hold a middle-income job are much different than they were 50 years ago. Excellent education today requires that every student be prepared to succeed in post-secondary education or technical training, as all students now require some level of education beyond high school. Efforts to ensure such an education must begin when a child is born, if not before, and must provide rich learning experiences before that child enters kindergarten. Effective family and community involvement in a child's intellectual, emotional and social development must be promoted both prior to and after enrollment in school, where the child must constantly be challenged to meet the highest standards.

This vision of excellence and the agenda to foster it remain faithful to the abiding ideal of public education—promoting the common good by developing an informed citizenry, strengthening democratic values and advancing economic opportunity for individuals as well as the nation.

This Task Force report builds upon a review of effective examples of excellence to outline four fundamental areas of reform to ensure that every child in America receives the excellent education that he or she deserves. Its recommendations require vision, willpower, resources, and strategic capacity to replace outdated, disconnected and discredited practices with new approaches. This necessitates turning away from comfortable paths that all too often have led to dead ends for many students. In short, these recommendations map a road to the future. They make promises we must keep, for the best ideas in the world are rendered useless if they are divorced from the human, institutional and financial resources necessary to put them into practice.