ES SELECT »

Our experts' take on the issues that matter today . . . or will tomorrow.

17 FEBRUARY 2012

» **The Great Recession, the Occupy movement,** Mitt Romney's wealth and career with Bain Capital, and President Obama's tax plans and vision for restoring the long-term viability of the American economy have all steered public attention to the wide and growing income and opportunity gaps between the rich and the rest of us. David Brooks' recent column on this topic says that America is dividing into a "two-caste society" linked only tenuously by a common culture.

In this, the U.S. is not alone. According to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, income disparity is growing throughout the world, including in generally egalitarian countries such as Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. Advances in information technology, which place a premium on technical, analytical, and communications skills, and which emphasize the importance of education, are but one reason, according to the OECD.

Around the globe we see that educational opportunities are unevenly distributed and, instead of ameliorating differences, sometimes make them worse. So, in the U.S., as in the rest of the world, we see enormous and longstanding gaps in academic achievement. Education Sector Senior Policy Analyst Elena Silva last fall spent a week in Salzburg, Austria, discussing this issue with 50 representatives of 26 developed and developing nations. The gathering was organized by the Salzburg Global Seminar and the Educational Testing Service.

In **A Postcard From Salzburg** (read the essay online http://www.educationsector.org/publications/postcard-salzburg), Silva reports that, while nations across the world have dramatically increased access to education, nearly 70 million children still are shut out. She also learned that, with more children going to school, improving quality has become a higher priority in many countries. Politics and power inevitably shape education reform efforts around the world as they do in the U.S. Silva notes that "whoever holds the power to decide on the goals, design, delivery, and financing of education decides the future of the nation."

To combat these problems, which pose a threat to democracy as well as to health and the global economy, former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown just last month called for the creation of a Global Fund for Education. Solutions won't be easy, fast, or cheap. But they are possible.

You'll want to read the whole essay for more of Silva's keen observations and insights.

This piece is the first of what we're calling the *ES Select* series. The series will consist of timely essays, reportage, analysis, and compilations of blog entries on topics ranging from early education through college and into the labor market. They will be produced by Education Sector's talented staff of policy experts as well as other contributors. We'll be sending them out at least monthly or more often if warranted by news or policy developments. I know that you, like me, receive far more information than you can possibly absorb. But I always make time to read articles that help me make sense out of the world—and that's the standard we'll apply to these pieces.

We welcome your **feedback, questions, and ideas** (info@educationsector.org) for how to make *ES Select* as valuable as possible for you. »

Richard Lee Colvin, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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A Postcard From Salzburg

BY ELENA SILVA

Salzburg, Austria, is a beautiful, charming, and small old city with medieval castles overlooking the downtown and views of snow-covered Alps all around. Little boys and girls strap on backpacks and head off, mostly on foot and on their own, to schools that look like sets from Ikea—neat, colorful, and symmetrical. There seem to be more bikes than cars. And even in the bustling downtown shopping area, the city is quiet. Hearing *Stille Nacht* seems fitting (and it is: the famed song was written in a little Alpine village just a few miles outside of Salzburg). All in all, being in Salzburg is a lot like being inside of a snow globe.

Of course not everything is perfect in Salzburg. Income inequality is growing here, as it is in Austria, and as it is throughout the world. Big gaps exist between who succeeds and who doesn't, and increasingly this is determined by income and parent education levels. [i] This trend toward income inequality and educational inequity is evident worldwide. Even nation-sized snow globes like Finland are not immune to this trend—the OECD recently reported that the gap between rich and poor has been widening over the past two decades as rapidly in Finland as it is in the U.S. [ii]

How we understand this trend, and what we can do about it in education, was the subject of a weeklong seminar on global achievement gaps sponsored by the Salzburg Global Seminar and the Educational Testing Service. Roughly 50 people representing 26 developing and developed nations gathered to present, discuss, and debate strategies to close these gaps. Among this group were current and former Ministers of Education, government officials, policymakers, research and teaching faculty, and representatives from NGOs and think tanks. Here's what I learned:

Access to education is still a problem in much of the world. Nearly 70 million children have no access to school. And 28 million are in armed conflict. These two facts are inextricably related (and make it hard but all the more important for me to explain to my weapon-obsessed 7-year-old son that the children he sees in the newspaper wielding big guns are not really "lucky"). The opportunity cost for a poor family to send a child to school (rather than put them to work and/or avoid school fees) remains a deciding factor for school attendance in much of the world. This is especially true for rural children, and for girls, who make up more than half of the children worldwide who don't attend school. [iii] Nearly 40 percent of poor girls in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, have never been to school. Getting them there isn't just about providing a school—it is also about ensuring clean water and basic nutrition for their families, and sometimes a simple means of transportation. For example, a recent effort to distribute bicycles to girls in a poor rural state in India has proved to be hugely successful, more than doubling girls' attendance at school in just four years. [iv]

Compulsory education policies play a major role in increasing access and attendance. These policies are on the rise worldwide, and within a generation, it is expected that nearly all children in the world will have access at least to primary school. Assuming this trend, the priority shifts from ensuring basic access to primary education to ensuring quality education from birth through higher education.

The snow starts to fall in Salzburg as we start to consider what education might be like in the future, and what forces will bring (and are already bringing) those changes to both developed and developing nations.

The importance of a quality education is growing for two reasons. First, more income inequality reinforces education as the primary means for social mobility. Notably, income inequality between nations has been decreasing for the past decade as poor countries grow faster than rich countries. But income inequality within nations, worldwide, is growing fast. Related to this

(and one cause of income inequality) are advances in technology that have hugely influenced the labor sector and now privilege a set of high-demand skills (those with the skills to manipulate and manage new types of information and new forms of communication have earnings and income gains that dwarf those who have low or basic skills). In short, economies and societies have become more knowledge-based. If you have knowledge, or can get it, you will do well. If you don't and can't, you will likely be poor and have few options to move yourself or your children out of poverty. [v] If equity is a goal, this makes it even more important for the state to play a strong role in educating the broader public, and educating them well.

Still, many nations that have closed access gaps and list equity as a key priority, including the U.S., still tolerate segregated student populations, almost ensuring inequitable outcomes. The Roma population, which extends through Central and South Eastern Europe, has been historically and continuously placed in separate schools and, disproportionately, in special education. In Bulgaria, for example, it is estimated that between 44 percent and 70 percent of Roma students are in separate schools and more than half are in special education. In some ways, this resembles the African American population in the U.S., which remains segregated by income and race. Nearly 40 percent of black students in the U.S. attend intensely segregated schools (90-100 percent minority), and African American boys in particular are more likely to be suspended from school (half of black boys grades 6-12) or drop out altogether (more than half in many large urban districts). [vi]

In between seminar sessions, we gather for tea and coffee to talk about how different our contexts are back home. The quiet clean roads of Salzburg are so different from the streets in Egypt and Chile, which are now filled with student protestors, or the unpaved paths in rural Pakistan, or the noisy streets clogged with traffic in the U.S. But we agree on a lot, especially when the subject turns to teachers.

Teachers matter most for quality. The development of a strong teaching workforce is recognized globally as a priority for closing achievement gaps, and confirmed by a full body of research. [vii] Lessons from PISA, an international standardized assessment of 15-year-olds in 65 countries, tell us we need teachers who are well-qualified, well-supported, and empowered. Yet, globally, as in the U.S., we still grapple with how to prepare and support great teachers. We need, worldwide, a **massive** change in the teaching force, with **massive** investments in preparing and developing teachers, in wages, and in other measures to attract and keep the best and the brightest into the teaching force.

From a minister of education perspective, however, teacher quality is one of the most costly, difficult, comparatively invisible, and long-term projects a government can take on. On the bright side, many governments are taking it on anyway. China, for example, is pouring resources into its teaching workforce, especially in rural underserved areas. The nation has invested in state-funded teacher preparation programs, providing free education and higher salaries (roughly 10 percent more) to those who will commit to teaching in rural areas. China has also been investing heavily in distance learning for teachers through satellite television and the internet. As in the U.S., there are conflicts over the rights and benefits of teachers, codified in China's 1993 Teachers' Law, which gave teachers the same status and protections as local civil servants. But by and large, the status of the teaching profession, particularly in rural areas where teachers traditionally were untrained and underpaid, is improving in China.

I wonder, in the U.S., if it's getting better or worse? Efforts to improve the preparation of teachers before they reach the classroom, and setting up better ways to evaluate and support them once they do, suggest

progress. But U.S. teachers are feeling blamed and burdened like never before, and the wave of reforms aimed at improving the profession is leaving scars.

How we spend is as important as what we spend. Public spending on education, on average, is 4.7 percent of a nation's GDP. [viii] This has grown over the past two decades in most of the world. In Latin America, for example, public spending on education rose from 2.7 percent to 4.9 percent from 1990 to 2010. However, in all regions of the world spending remains skewed toward the upper quintile of income (and not surprisingly, wealthy students the world over tend to perform better [ix]). In many cases this is by design, with nations choosing to focus on the education of elites to grow national economies. This is a mistake. Recent research by economists Eric Hanushek and Ludwig Woessmann finds that while a focus on select talent can play a role in growing nations, the growth of economies depends on improving educational outcomes across the entire population. [x]

Private spending on education, which is not usually reported by governments, is not well examined as a factor in educational inequity. But the amount spent on private schools and private tutors is substantial. A World Bank review of household survey data found that in 2002, average global private education expenditures were 11.4 percent of total education expenditures. The private expenditures of Peru and Jamaica, at one extreme, both top 40 percent. (Scandinavian nations at the other extreme spend almost nothing.) Much of this goes to private schooling but private tutoring has been growing in both low-income and high-income nations. In South Korea, for example, parents spend roughly 2 percent of the total GDP on private tutoring. This is contributing to a growing out-of-school education economy and a "shadow curriculum"— the learning that wealthier students gain outside of school—that can exacerbate inequities. Wealth is sticky, it is said, and we can't keep the rich from providing for their children. Can we, though, create learning environments for poor children that can compete with the home environments of the elite?

Inequities in spending are equally evident in the U.S., a nation that functions essentially with 50 separate systems for financing public schools (each with its own separate constitution guaranteeing the right to education). Decisions about how to allocate funding fairly among districts and schools sit not at the national level but with each individual state, and result in huge variations in funding (and finance equity) across states. New Jersey, for example, not only funds at a relatively high level overall, roughly 16,000 per pupil, but also directs more resources to schools serving poorer students ($13,464 to schools at zero poverty compared to $18,841 at 30 percent poverty).[xi] In contrast, North Carolina's per pupil spending sits at $8,401, with high-poverty schools receiving almost $1,500 less per student. [xii]

In the end, just spending more overall won't do much good for closing gaps. Targeting spending for certain populations or for certain stages of development, however, can. Recent research by the World Bank finds a correlation between the share of public education spending that goes to primary schooling and equality of educational opportunity. [xiii] Early childhood education in particular has the best return as an educational investment, although more spending still goes to tertiary education worldwide. [xiv]

We stroll through town, stopping at the Christmas markets and for a cup of steaming spiced gluhwein, and then a visit to Mozart's childhood home, where his first piano still sits (its keys reversed, more black than white, since at the time ebony was cheaper and easier to get than ivory). It is thought that the prodigy composed his first sonata when he was just four. I wonder if universal pre-K would have helped or hindered young Wolfgang's gift.

Starting early should be a priority. We know not only that early childhood education promises a better

payoff but also the importance of specific interventions. We know, for example, that literacy at the earliest stage is critical for success, a fact backed by research across the globe showing that the late development and overall lack of vocabulary has a negative impact on learning.

OECD's 2009 analysis of PISA showed that in most countries 15-year-olds who had attended some pre-primary school outperformed those who had not. After accounting for income, students who had attended pre-primary school scored an average gain of roughly one additional year of schooling. In the U.S., they found no such gains. This perhaps points to a focus on access over quality, and to a U.S. system that is relatively weak and fragmented in its efforts to deliver education in the earliest and most important years. Overall, our nation lacks a coherent national policy agenda for early childhood education. Recent federal efforts to award grants to nine states to improve their early learning standards and program quality hints at a commitment to changing this but certainly doesn't ensure progress. In part, our resistance to change rests with the strong American belief that parents and families, not the government, should provide early learning. This same belief is in large part what has kept the U.S. from ratifying an international agreement between nations that establishes a shared set of goals for the education, development, and protection of young children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is not specific to early childhood education policy; it demands freedom from violence, unsafe employment, exploitation, and abduction, and extends rights to basic nutrition and education. But it's remarkable—at least among an international community--that out of 193 nations, the U.S. is one of only two that won't get on board (Somalia is the other).

A fire is blazing in the fireplace as we gather in to hear Marion Wright Edelman reflect on her experiences growing up in the segregated American South, and then as a leader in the U.S. civil rights movement, including the Poor People's Campaign. It was a campaign, she explains, that led to new investments in food and nutrition and early education. A focus on prevention and early intervention is the right thing to do, Edelman says, but acknowledges that it has been "exceedingly hard."

Politics is key to success and failure. Anyone who has ever been involved in education reform, at any level and in any nation, knows that there are many and often conflicting views. Whoever holds the power to decide on the goals, design, delivery, and financing of education decides the future of the nation. Unfortunately, many grand plans for education are easily mired in political agendas and timelines that conflict with the necessary timelines for implementation and the assessment of results. The "long route" of accountability, which doesn't circumvent but acknowledges the different voices and perspectives of key actors—politicians, experts, civil servants, and teachers—is the road less travelled. But it is essential, as captured in this quote by Jo Ritzen, the former Minister of Education for the Netherlands: "There are two maxims that apply to educational reform: firstly, change without opposition is generally not worthwhile; and secondly, change which remains controversial yields inadequate results. Any attempt at reform must steer a careful course between the two."

To conclude, for all of us who have had the privilege of a quality education and the outcomes to match, a quote from Betty Mould-Iddrisu, Minister of Education for Ghana: "Here, education is everything. It is life. Let us not forget that."

Notes

[i] This is seemingly exacerbated by an Austrian school schedule that runs only four hours a day through fourth grade, which requires either at least one non-working parent or a very long stretch of afterschool programming.

[ii] OECD, *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising* (December 2011).

[iii] Those that do go, however, hold their own on international test performance—scoring higher in reading, slightly lower in math, and on par in science.

[iv] http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/bike-blog/2011/nov/25/cycling-indian-schoolgirls-bike-blog

[v] The impact of parent background on educational outcomes, which decreased toward the middle part of the last century, appears now to be on the increase.

[vi] Educational Testing Service, *A Strong Start: Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success* (Washington, DC: 2011), http://www.ets.org/s/sponsored_events/pdf/16818_BlackMale_trifold3_WEB.pdf

[viii] The World Bank, data tables, public spending on education, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS

[ix] Even among those enrolled in school, richer students perform better on standardized exams. Looking at PISA math scores, the largest income-related performance differences are in Latin American, specifically Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.

[x] Hanushek and Woessmann find that the lower a country's average score on international tests like PISA, the lower its overall economic growth. See, OECD, *The High Cost of Low Educational Performance: The Long-Run Impact of Improving PISA Outcomes* (2010). Also see Hanushek and Wöessmann, "The Role of Education Quality in Economic Growth," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4122, February 2007.

[xi] Bruce Baker, David Sciarra, Danielle Farrie. *Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card* (Newark, NJ: Education Law Center, September, 2010).

[xiii] F. Ferreira and J. Gignoux, "The Measurement of Educational Inequality: Achievement and Opportunity," World Bank Policy and Research Working Paper 5873, 2011.

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