

Opportunity to Learn

Norm Fruchter &
Christina Mokhtar-Ross

In 2019 the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine published *Monitoring Educational Equity*, a report by its Committee on Developing Indicators of Educational Equity. The report proposes “indicators that measure disparities in students’ academic achievement and attainment outcomes and engagement in schooling; and indicators that measure equitable access to resources and opportunities.”

Monitoring Educational Equity is the latest oscillation in the long struggle to raise the opportunity to learn standards to parity with efforts to measure student achievement outcomes. One of the report’s many virtues is that standardized testing occupies a much-diminished component of the report’s student outcome indicators, from pre-school to high school graduation and post-secondary readiness.

The first national effort to assess the lack of opportunity to learn in U.S. schooling was James Coleman’s monumental study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (EEO), a 1966 follow-up to President Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which established Federal Title 1 funding for economically disadvantaged students. Coleman and his colleagues, as well as most of the U.S. Congress who commissioned the study, assumed that the EEO report would document strong causal relationships between the separate and unequal education imposed on the nation’s Black students and their lagging student outcomes. The EEO study did find that Black student achievement outcomes were grossly unequal. One of the report’s findings, for example, indicated that the average achievement level of Black 12th-grade southern students equaled the achievement levels of 7th-grade white northeastern students. But Coleman’s analysis established no causal links between widespread inequitable opportunities to learn and the severe race-based achievement gaps the EEO study documented. Instead, Coleman’s findings indicted family background and same-race peers as the key causal factors. In Coleman’s conclusion:

schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his (sic) background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that inequalities imposed on children by their home neighborhood and peer environment are carried along to become inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.

The Coleman report generated an academic industry committed to reanalyzing its conclusions. Though EEO mobilized the largest database ever assembled for education analysis, Coleman’s available statistical tools were largely correlational and—subsequent consensus suggests—could not justify his policy conclusions. Moreover, the methodologies structuring his input data were far too limited and unnuanced to capture the pervasive influence of structural racism or the “soft bigotry of low expectations” in U.S. schooling systems. Yet, Coleman’s EEO study bequeathed to educational policy the notion that *both* resources invested in schooling and the societal commitment to schooling itself, couldn’t compensate for the indelible shaping effects of student and peer family background.

The next landmark event in U.S. education was the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the report of a national commission formed by President Reagan’s Secretary of Education Terrell Bell in 1983 to assess the quality of teaching and learning in both public and private schools and compare “American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations.” *A Nation at Risk* charged that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

The *Risk* report made recommendations across five broad categories: expanding curriculum content; raising college admission standards and imposing standardized tests at key instructional transitions; increasing instructional time; basing teacher salaries on demonstrated competency; and



vectorfusionart - stock.adobe.com

providing federal aid for gifted and talented students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, minority and language minority students, and students with disabilities. The report dramatized the poor performance of U.S. schooling compared to other countries' outcomes but didn't indicate that our laggard schooling results were primarily caused by our failure to effectively educate the nation's poor students and students of color. *Risk* never acknowledged our race- and class-based achievement gaps or our pervasive failure to provide equitable opportunities to learn to the nation's disadvantaged students.

A Nation at Risk generated a national education standards movement and a massive increase in standardized testing. The years after the publication of the Risk report saw a robust effort to establish state and national curriculum standards and a national testing movement to assess how well students were meeting those standards.

Reauthorizations of the original 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1994 under Clinton, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 under George W. Bush, married national standards to national testing and accountability efforts to enforce those standards and impose sanctions on schools and districts that failed to meet them.

The 1994 and 2001 ESSA reauthorizations generated fierce fights to insert opportunity to learn standards into the revised legislation. The evidence supporting the need for the opportunity to learn standards was by then universal. Research studies had established significant disparities in how states funded and regulated their local school systems, resulting in well funded districts and poorly funded school districts in every state. The distribution of gifted and talented programs, accelerated learning, advanced placement, and other programs became deeply segregated learning tracks across the nation's schools. Teachers, textbooks, facilities, and student outcomes all exhibited the same sharp downward gradient from advantaged white students to disadvantaged students of color. International studies indicated that U.S. schools were among the world's most segregated and inequitable.

Each of those ESSA reauthorization efforts, in 1994, 2001, and even in 2015, when the Obama administration's Every Student Succeeds Act reaffirmed standards but devolved NCLB testing to the states, failed to include any requirements for opportunity to learn standards. The National Academy of Sciences' *Monitoring Educational Equity* is so important because it's the first time a respected national entity has called for efforts to pair the measurement of student outcomes with an assessment of the quality of learning schools and districts provide to students of differing race, class, gender, disability and language ability. Narrowing and eventually eliminating these patterned differences in student outcomes begins with, and requires, guaranteeing equity of opportunity to learn to all our children when they first enter the schoolhouse door.