Broader, BOLDER Approach to Education

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A Broader, Bolder Education Policy Framework

Seven years after the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education began calling attention to the impediments poverty poses to teaching and learning, there is much to celebrate. Declarations that poverty is just an "excuse" are waning and top BBA policy priorities – early childhood education, public investment in health care, nutrition supports, and school-based wraparound services – are gaining public backing and policy momentum.

Serious scholarship that drives public policy has likewise affirmed BBA's perspective. The **Council on Foreign Relations** points to disparities in opportunity from pre-kindergarten to college, based on parents' social class, that drive achievement gaps. The Equity and Excellence Commission produced ***For Each and Every Child***, which calls on the Department of Education to enact a more comprehensive approach to education to mitigate the massive impacts of poverty on schools. ***The Iceberg Effect***, authored jointly by the National Superintendents Roundtable and the Horace Mann League, urges the assessment of international test scores through a broader lens that includes both system inputs and outputs. And an AEI/Brookings-led team of experts spanning the ideological spectrum endorse a holistic pre-k-to-college education agenda in ***Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security***. Eminent education professors jointly edited ***Closing the Opportunity Gap***, a collection of scholarly essays that explore a broad range of opportunity disparities, as well as ways to mitigate them. And two of the nation's leading education economists produced ***Whither Opportunity***, an authoritative compendium docu-

menting the many ways in which our education system reflects and compounds growing societal economic inequality. Research and policy have increasingly come together in support of a Broader, Bolder Approach.

Yet many challenges remain, some have grown, and others are new. Rates of both family and concentrated poverty have risen sharply in recent years. There is also increased awareness of the impacts of institutional racism on many aspects of American society, including schools. And despite growing recognition that major reforms of the past decades have not achieved their stated goals, and even done harm in some cases, framework that takes these factors into account to guide a better path forward has yet to be fully articulated, let alone enacted as policy.

Moreover, our societal definition of education has not yet evolved to meet evidentiary reality or 21st century demands. A Broader, Bolder Approach emphasizes that education happens not only in classrooms, but from birth, all day, and all year in a variety of contexts. Likewise, our goals for public education, which lay the foundation for how it is delivered, must reflect that it is fundamentally a common good; beyond preparing individual students to be productive workers, our education system is helping the next generation of children to grow into adults who can effectively navigate and care for an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Now that Congress has finally reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a refreshed BBA with an explicit, expanded policy agenda can build on the promise of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and help advance policies at the federal, state, and district levels that effectively mitigate poverty's impacts.

Mission

The Broader, Bolder Approach to Education is grounded in the understanding that the kinds of educational opportunities – both within and outside of schools — that help well-off children thrive are the same opportunities that would most benefit children who lack access to them. So rather than asserting that children disadvantaged by poverty, racial and linguistic minority status, and other factors need categorically different kinds of educational supports, BBA's policy agenda helps ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn through enriching experiences. It advances a public education system with ambitious goals that reflect our democratic ideals: preparing all students for college, careers, and meaningful civic participation. And, since schools alone cannot address the range of needs of all students, it calls for close collaboration and alignment with other agencies and institutions to provide many of the fundamental educational supports that the best-off children enjoy as a matter of course.

A comprehensive approach to education policy strikes the right balance between test scores and other outcomes. Achievement gaps in test scores are not the root problem, but important symptoms of the underlying problems facing our schools, and they reflect overly narrow measures of what we want schools and students to attain. A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education works to close opportunity gaps –disparities in opportunity that begin before birth and compound early disadvantages in a range of ways– in order to effectively narrow achievement gaps.

Since poverty manifests itself in various ways and places in children's educational trajectories, BBA addresses them at each stage, starting very early, so that the playing field is as even as possible and so that supports at each point lay a strong foundation for subsequent growth. And because public education is the shared responsibility of federal, state, and local governments, BBA calls on each to fulfill its role, including collaboration with other agencies and actors at and across those levels.

Addressing out-of-school factors

Early Childhood Experiences

Children living in poverty arrive at kindergarten already far behind their wealthier peers across a variety of cognitive, language, and social-emotional domains that are foundational for ensuring success in school and life. Research finds that these gaps are very hard to close, and that some key foundations for learning have likely already been poorly established. Yet our current system responds to this reality by hoping that kindergarten and early elementary teachers can close the gaps, and by enacting evaluation systems that hold them largely responsible when that fails. While we have seen increasing understanding by policymakers of the importance of children's earliest years, we still invest many fewer public dollars in preschoolers than in school-aged children, and fewer still in infants and toddlers. State birth-to-five systems thus reach far too few children with uneven levels of program quality. Moreover, the lack of robust birth-to-five systems in states makes it harder to create continuity and alignment with the early primary grades.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach ensures that every student arrives at kindergarten with the benefit of high-quality early learning and necessary health, wellness, and family support services from birth. A combination of universal and targeted supports can provide equitable opportunities for young children and their families. Such supports begin by ensuring low-income parents the same opportunity to adjust to and bond with their new babies as wealthier parents enjoy through paid parental leave, which is already a legal right in virtually every other country in the world. Broader, Bolder policies help all parents acquire the information and support to be their children's first and most important teachers through expansion of home visitation programs and other policies that promote early childhood health and strong families. And BBA would build on the success of federal, state and local efforts to ensure adequately financed state early learning systems that enhance both access and quality. This will help parents go to work secure in the knowledge that their children's early care and education is safe, nurturing, and preparing them well for school and life.

  Fundamentally improving education means making certain that the education system is linked to a well-financed, comprehensive birth-to-five system. Combining federal and state standards and resources with state and local flexibility, and close collaboration among a range of public and private institutions, helps leverage the unique assets of and meet the unique needs of each community.

Afterschool and summer

The outdated structure of the US school day and year further impedes the success of low-income students. Continued reliance on a calendar that was designed so that farmers' children could help with the harvest widens gaps by exacerbating disparities in students' access to enriching activities during those out-of-school hours and months.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach provides all children opportunities for meaningful, enriching experiences all day and all year. Attention in recent years to expanded learning opportunities has reduced out-of-school-time disparities in individual schools and in select districts. But for this momentum to even the educational playing field in a meaningful way, three requirements must be met. First, afterschool and summer enrichment opportunities are available to all students as a core part of the public education system – whether through schools or organizations that partner with them – and not optional "extras," which are particularly vulnerable to political vagaries and budget cuts. Second, options for enrichment are equivalent across socioeconomic classes. In addition to the tutoring and mentoring that low-income children may need more of, enrichment activities should broaden their experiences and world view. Indeed, it is particularly critical that students who are less likely to be exposed to organized sports, activities such as the fine arts, music, and trips to museums, and challenging games like chess in other contexts, enjoy those opportunities as part of their schooling. Finally, those activities and resources, as well as meals, should be coordinated with the school and district curriculum, so that they complement classroom learning.

Health

Children who grow up in poverty suffer health-related issues that limit their achievement in school. They are more likely to live in housing and neighborhoods that expose them to allergens, lead and other toxins, and unhealthy air, and less likely to regularly access doctors who can prevent and treat their illnesses. Further, the stresses associated with living in poverty threaten their mental and emotional well-being. As a result, poor children come to class less focused and prepared and are disproportionately chronically absent, which further widens achievement gaps. While there has been a gradual increase in the number of school-based health clinics, which provide preventive and remedial care and even crisis interventions, clinics serve only a small minority of students, and few states and districts have policies in place to help them scale up and become sustainable.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach establishes a strong foundation for all children's physical and mental health and incorporates wellness into education standards and practice. Not only should we expand the presence of health clinics in schools serving high-risk student populations, but enact policies to support those programs. More broadly, it means that all children have a medical home, and that the public education system is structured to actively nurture students' well-being. The system should

thus collaborate with health providers and other agencies to provide remedial care and crisis intervention as needed. However, such services would be the exception, rather than the norm, and strategies to avert crises should be built in for all students and schools.

Nutrition

Parents who struggle financially often cut back on the quantity and quality of food they purchase in order to meet other basic needs. Indeed, high levels of unemployment and a dearth of jobs that pay a living wage have driven up rates of both hunger and obesity among US children. The share of families that rely on SNAP/food stamp benefits has increased in response, and subsidized federal programs for school lunch, breakfast, and even dinner have expanded, along with delivery of summer meals in high-poverty communities. At the same time, cuts to these programs remain a constant threat, and many children who would benefit from nutritional supports are ineligible or lack access to them.

- **Policy solution**

  Schools are most successful when students are not distracted from learning because they are hungry or worried about where their next meal will come from. Every child should have consistent access to nutritious food all day and all year, and the school system, with support from other agencies, should be structured to provide it without stigma or barriers to access.

Improving in-school factors

Funding equity

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was enacted in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty. ESEA recognized that our local funding system inherently disadvantages schools serving poorer communities, and that state funding schemes rarely compensate for, and often exacerbate, those inequities. In the decades since, less federal support is targeted to the poorest schools and the focus has shifted increasingly to standards over supports. At the same time, funding disparities among schools have grown, leaving our highest-poverty schools at growing disadvantage just as concentrated poverty and segregation are on the rise.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach ensures that schools' resources are commensurate with their needs. Our public education system can come closer to its historic ideal as a great equalizer by linking greater and better-targeted federal funding to incentives for states and districts to establish funding schemes that compensate for student disadvantage, rather than compound it.

Accountability

Comprehensive accountability systems are essential to ensuring all children a high-quality education. Because accountability policies establish the goals to which educators, students, and schools aspire, and the standards by which they are deemed to have succeeded or failed, they drive all other aspects of the

system. Over-emphasis on closing gaps in test scores to the neglect of other issues has led to the development of accountability systems that can overlook the impacts of poverty on students' scores and penalize the very schools and teachers that are struggling the most and that need the most support.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach to accountability employs broad measures of student well-being to direct supports as needed to improve teaching and enable all students to attain high standards. BBA recognizes the complex system of factors and actors that influence student well-being, and that effective accountability helps strengthen each one and ensure that all maximize their positive impact. Assessments should therefore be structured to fulfill a broader and more productive purpose than is currently true of most. They should capture a wide range of measures of student well-being to reliably track of student progress toward readiness for college, careers, and civic engagement.

  To help students prepare for these challenges and opportunities, schools must nurture not only reading, math, science, and history skills, but the arts, executive function, and students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being and civic engagement. Capturing these outcomes accurately and situating them within a broader context for accountability purposes requires:

  - Exploring and employing new, high-quality tools that employ culturally and linguistically sensitive measures, such as project- and proficiency-based assessments.
  - Leveraging master teachers and leaders to explore inspection systems like those employed in other countries to assess and strengthen the entire school system.
  - Employing Opportunity Dashboards like those being explored by pioneering scholars and policymakers to inform and improve policies affecting education.

Teacher and principal quality

Scholarly research and common sense increasingly converge regarding the critical importance of consistent access to teachers with solid training, subject-matter expertise, real-world preparation, strong early support, and classroom experience. Yet much of our policy focuses on weeding out bad educators, rather than on recruiting, developing, supporting and retaining good ones, and on using narrow and dubious metrics to distinguish those two groups. And policies too often neglect the crucial role of strong leadership within schools.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education prioritizes developing a strong, experienced corps of professional educators while supporting the dismissal of the small minority of weak ones. It also ensures that it is truly bad teachers, not good teachers struggling under difficult conditions, who are weeded out. And it works to build an education system that makes teaching and leading in high-needs schools attractive and meaningful. This shift emphasizes metrics for nurturing and improving educators over

those focused on penalizing or firing them. It channels the right types and levels of resources to schools serving disadvantaged students, so that every student's social, physical, and emotional needs are met, and teachers and principals can focus on teaching and leading and improving their craft.

Charter School Accountability

The failure of many traditional public schools to serve disadvantaged students well, together with facets of the standards-and-accountability movement, has fueled the rapid growth of the charter school sector. Charter schools enroll an increasing share of students in major urban districts, and in a few, they will soon serve more students than regular district schools. (In New Orleans and Detroit, they already do.) While the best-run charter schools boost student outcomes, those that are poorly managed have done real harm. The bulk of research finds that charters, on average, may confer negligible advantage for the students they target, compared to the neighborhood public schools those students would otherwise attend. Moreover, as the sector has grown in size and policy influence, advocates have advanced laws at both the federal and state levels that limit many charter schools' accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to the communities they serve, notwithstanding their receipt of a growing share of tax dollars.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education establishes an oversight framework that helps the students and communities charters serve to reap the kinds of benefits currently enjoyed by only some. All public schools – whether regular district or charter schools – should be governed democratically and with full transparency, including accounting for the use of both public and private funds, to reduce conflicts of interest. Ensuring that all schools serve diverse student needs and curtailing the "push-out" of students who are harder to teach, whose families are more difficult to engage, and whose test scores will drag down the school average, would better serve disadvantaged communities. And strengthening the collaboration between district and charter schools and their governing bodies would fulfill Albert Shanker's original vision for charters – as laboratories to test innovative ways to better meet the needs of a diverse student body and disseminate those that work – and reduce the potential to weaken the traditional public school system.

  BBA does not support voucher programs, which do not hold the private schools they fund accountable for the public dollars they use.

Strengthening Communities

Addressing race, segregation, and concentrated poverty

As rates of child and family poverty grew during and in the aftermath of the Great Recession, poverty also became more concentrated in certain cities and neighborhoods. This exacerbated the already difficult circumstances of children of color, who have long been disproportionately clustered in our country's least resourced, most chaotic, and most isolated communities. Widespread joblessness, crime, violence, and dysfunction combine with scant public and private resources to isolate families and make the climb

out of poverty especially difficult. Indeed, research documents the severe obstacles to school success posed by these circumstances. Yet policymakers accept racial segregation and economic and social isolation as unavoidable; some even assert that schools and children can thrive in the face of such devastation through within-school changes alone.

- **Policy solution**

  A Broader, Bolder Approach advances strategies that are among the most effective means of increasing the achievement of low-income minority students, yet largely ignored. BBA promotes the racial and economic integration of schools and of the neighborhoods those schools serve. Exploring innovative policies, like incentives for diversity in school choice plans and place-based scholarships, can help integrate schools and districts racially and economically. Creating a truly level playing field requires addressing segregation at both the school and community levels, but because the latter may be more politically and logistically challenging, educators should focus on policies that reduce racial and economic isolation in classrooms and schools without losing sight of the larger context in which that isolation exists.

Grounding Reform in Community Input

Finally, BBA seeks to expand the education policymaking table. Reform is most effective when it is informed by people with real experience and expertise with public schools and the education system. Those who design education policy should not dismiss educators who disagree with diagnoses of the problems and prescriptions for fixing them, as part of the problem. Indeed, the growing disconnect between the people who advance policy changes and those who implement them has sown distrust and hostility and is degrading important discussions.

- **Policy solution**

  Policy change is most successful when grounded in evidence, including evidence of the needs and capacities of the communities that will implement the changes. A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education thus calls for the voices of parents, students, educators, and school and community leaders to help shape the development of policies focused on tangible outcomes and authentic evidence of learning. For example, master teachers and veteran principals could build on evidence regarding statistically valid measures to develop systems of teacher accountability that respond to principals' desire to guide improvement of instruction and teachers' need for meaningful feedback and ways to improve their practice. Such input would provide essential data missing from current education policy debates. Robust guidance from those closest to classrooms also ensures that local elected school boards reflect and address communities' needs in shaping policy.

BBA doesn't aim to beat the odds for a few students; it aims to change them

Many education policies favor better-off students, and some recent reforms are designed to help some disadvantaged students beat the difficult odds that they face of academic success.

A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education aims not just to beat the odds for a few children, but to improve the odds of success for all. Directly addressing poverty-related impediments to effective teaching and learning – enhancing children's experiences before they enter school and in the hours and months before and after school days, improving funding equity, accountability, and teacher and leader quality, and ensuring meaningful community input — ensures all children equal and meaningful opportunities to learn and to build the foundations for healthy, productive lives.

The good news is that there are a growing number of models – not only in individual schools, but at the community level, that have embraced and implemented Broader, Bolder Approaches to Education. As BBA and our allies document, these strategies are at work in diverse urban, suburban, and rural communities across the country. Many are full-service community schools districts, others are supported by Promise Neighborhood grants and other federal and state initiatives, and a few were established by wealthy individuals with a passion for leveling the playing field. All recognize that learning begins before kindergarten, that the goals of public education extend far beyond reading and writing at grade level, and that the needs and assets of children, their families, and their communities must be the basis for successful education reform.

We must make such districts not exceptions, but the norm. Aligning and expanding the policies and funding streams that support them will make these efforts more sustainable, as will encouraging agencies at all levels of government to join forces to better serve the needs of all students and schools. Embedding these changes as core components of federal, state, and local legislation will transport them from the margins to the center of next-generation education policies and create a truly Broader, Bolder Approach to Education.