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The Effects of Race, Poverty & Equal Opportunity in America, By Eric J. Cooper, president, the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education

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In his State of the Union speech, President Obama pointed to a world-class education as one of the best anti-poverty programs. But our system can't live up to this aspiration unless we first recognize the racial inequality in our schools ultimately harms our shared national interest, and then develop a 21st century approach to learning that can address the challenges facing our schools.

The clarion call has already been sounded. The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce said in 2007 that:

If we continue on our current course, and the number of nations outpacing us in the education race continues to grow at its current rate, the American standard of living will steadily fall relative to those nations, rich and poor, that are doing a better job. The core problem is that our education and training systems were built for another era, an era in which most workers needed only a rudimentary education. It is not possible to get where we have to go by patching that system. We can get where we must go only by changing the system itself.

Businessman and philanthropist Bill Gates is another who has consistently sounded alarms about the state of education in America. In a February 2010 *Newsweek* piece, he wrote: "If we don't find ways to improve our schools, making them more effective and more accessible, we won't fulfill our commitment to equal opportunity, and we will become less competitive with other countries."

Ignoring this call to action would especially hurt the growing number of black and brown citizens educated in schools that have been called the "drop-out factories of cities." But the damage would not be limited to a minority of Americans. The U.S. Census Bureau has widely reported that America will go from a majority-white to majority-minority nation in 2037.

America must recognize that its self-interest is framed by its ability to address the challenges of racism, poverty and equal opportunity—recognizing the effects that they, separately and together, have on the life trajectories of the nation's youth and thus its future.

Our future must focus more on what connects us and less on what divides us. As Ben Franklin said at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we must all hang together or we shall hang separately. We must craft and commit to smart policies that bring together unifying aims, distinctive strengths and shared resources for the common good.

But if shared national values are not enough of an incentive, then the growing international focus on transforming education systems should motivate our country to action. Virtually every region in the world faces a similar challenge—how to educate its people to find work

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and build human capital in a world undergoing change faster than ever. The Hong Kong Education Commission of 2003 is but one example of the zeal shown by others.

In the recently published book *The Flat World And Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine our Future*, Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University cites the Hong Kong Commission to underscore the challenges presented to modern education by the global economy:

The 21st century is characterized by the availability of abundant information, advanced technology, a rapidly changing society, greater convenience in daily lives, and keener international competition. In response...[our Hong Kong] Education Reform should aim at nurturing in the new generation characteristics and abilities capable of meeting the challenges of the new century...Education Reform must be student-focused...to develop the potential and personalities of students. This student-focused spirit underlines the education and curriculum reforms, improvement to the learning environment, and enhancement of teacher training.

What is often lost in the polemics of education reform in this country is the question of whether we are situating learning in the lives of the students in a manner that deepens the opportunity for innovation, creativity and a resilience of spirit, enabling the learner to, as Ken Robinson has written, "cultivate the real depth and dynamism of human abilities of every sort." Ultimately, the key to systemic reform in education is standards that reinforce diverse backgrounds and aims while releasing individuality, which has been the engine of our nation's progress.

These complimentary values are not best developed through relentless standardization that confines curricula and fosters conformity. Nor are they served by a Hobson's choice between publics versus charters, or among private, parochial or home schooling. Rather than the popular choice of declaring that education policy be data-driven and focused primarily on the development of rudimentary and basic learning skills, policy should be directed by the need to customize and cultivate learning for each student based on the complex thinking required for success in the 21st century. Policy should begin with and be directed by values that become a vision of how the world should be—data keyed to the essence and extension of those values should be used to shape the ways and means of making it so. We must harness the discipline and drive of the data to the determination and direction of the values.

If the United States is to shake this generation loose from educational stagnation, we must focus relentlessly on learning, with active learners who understand that that intelligence is not something consigned by their genes, but is for them to develop by hard work and with adult leadership and effective instruction. When meaningful, engaging and relevant instruction in K-12 classrooms fosters lifelong learning for all Americans, the structural inequities in school and society may very well be swept away so that more citizens might share in the American dream. A strategic focus on investing in teaching and achievement based on discovering the unique talents of every child—and unleashing the passion and creativity in learning for the teacher and the student alike. That's a vision that serves us all.

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