

Globalization and Schools: It's time to recall Martin Luther King's challenge
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BACK IN 1979, the average worker with a college degree earned 75 percent more than the average high school graduate. Because of technology and globalization, the gap has leapt to 130 percent. This rising "college premium" does much to explain the growth of inequality over the past generation, so any serious response to inequality must make access to college broader and fairer. It should be broader because a higher rate of college attendance would share the fruits of globalization more widely. It should be fairer because, if the prizes for attending college are growing, it's essential that everyone begin life with a decent shot at winning them.

Because education boosts economic growth, and because it threatens no powerful lobby, virtually everyone claims to support it. The question is how it should be improved. Some commentators, pointing to the fact that schools in low-income districts already spend more per pupil than schools in affluent ones do, argue that failures at poor schools reflect complacent management rather than a lack of resources. Signaling at least partial acceptance of that theory, the Bush administration has tried to improve schools by holding them accountable and subjecting them to competition. Choice and accountability are attractive in principle, but studies of voucher programs in New York City, Milwaukee and Cleveland have found negligible gains from them. Costlier interventions must also be part of the solution.

The first opportunity for extra investment in education comes when children are young. That's when they are most malleable and when poor children start to fall behind: Even at age 3, researchers find class-based differences in linguistic and emotional maturity. The federal Head Start program, bolstered by a variety of state preschool programs, has succeeded in reaching many poor 3- and 4-year-olds. In 2001, 49 percent of 4-year-olds whose mothers were high school dropouts attended some type of preschool program, up from 36 percent a decade earlier. But that participation was still way below the 70 percent rate for children of college graduates. And the quality of many preschool programs is poor.

Head Start requires that only half of its teachers have two-year college degrees. In contrast, a 1960s experiment in Michigan known as the Perry Preschool program provided a fully qualified teacher for every six or seven students, and teachers visited each child at home weekly. The program raised IQ test scores by eight to 10 times the increase achieved by Head Start. It also reduced the likelihood that a student would require special education (by 43 percent), drop out of high school (by 25 percent) or be arrested (by 50 percent). A range of other studies, including recent ones in Michigan and Chicago, confirms that high-quality programs have lasting effects on poor children. Upgrading the 900,000 children in Head Start programs to something like the Perry program might require around \$2 billion a year, according to W. Steven Barnett of Rutgers University. But quality preschools reduce spending on special education, jails and welfare, saving money for society in the long term.

Early intervention would help schools from kindergarten through 12th grade do their job properly, since teachers would face fewer students who can't keep up. But it also makes sense to invest in K-12 education directly. Although it's true that low-income districts already spend more per pupil than do rich ones, this slight advantage is swamped by the challenge of teaching poor children, who on average have more discipline problems and require more remedial attention -- and will continue to do so even if preschool is improved. Because of the challenge of teaching poor children, the higher cost of special education and other factors, schools in low-income neighborhoods have less-experienced teachers and worse facilities than do schools in affluent ones, according to research by Cecilia Rouse of Princeton and Lisa Barrow of the Federal Reserve. These schools might spend more money per pupil, but they lack more money per pupil, too.

Which K-12 investments would be effective? Smaller classes are a leading candidate: A Tennessee experiment that divided pupils into classes of differing size in kindergarten and then returned them to regular-size classes in third grade found benefits from smaller classes that persisted to high school. Improving the quality of teachers is also likely to boost performance, though teacher quality is not necessarily linked to teacher certification. Publicly funded summer school could make a difference. The performance gap between privileged and poor children appears to be linked to the way they spend their summers, with the privileged attending enrichment programs while the poor are underoccupied.

Nearly 30 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. declared that the challenge for schools is "to teach so well that family background is no longer an issue." By increasing the rewards for education, globalization has added urgency to King's argument, but globalization paradoxically creates a temptation to ignore him, too. By driving down the cost of tradable goods such as cars and DVD players, it leaves untradable ones such as education looking expensive. There's a tendency for policymakers to say that education spending is growing a bit faster than inflation -- isn't that generous enough? But inflation is low partly because globalization brings us goods from cheap foreign suppliers. The economic challenge posed by those cheap foreign suppliers is precisely the reason we should invest more in our children.

This is the seventh editorial in an occasional series on inequality. Previous editorials in the series can be found at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/inequality>