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SOCIAL CLASS – NOT SCHOOL REFORM – MOST IMPACTS BLACK-WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

New book released by EPI & Teachers College, Columbia University, offers roadmap

At the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the stubborn achievement gap between black and white students is a key measure of our country's failure to achieve true equality. Federal and state officials are currently pursuing tougher accountability and other reforms at the school level to address this problem. In making schools their sole focus, however, these policy makers are neglecting an area that is vital to narrowing the achievement gap: social class differences that affect learning, according to a new book by Richard Rothstein and co-published by the Economic Policy Institute and Teachers College, Columbia University.

Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap shows that social class differences in health care quality and access, nutrition, childrearing styles, housing quality and stability, parental occupation and aspirations, and even exposure to environmental toxins, play a significant part in how well children learn and ultimately succeed. Rothstein – a visiting professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute, and the former *New York Times* education columnist – argues that blaming the gap mostly on failing schools is a mistake because it diverts attention from the need to address the economic and social gaps between children that thwart academic potential long before school starts.

“Closing the gaps between lower-class and middle-class children doesn't just require better schools. It requires social and economic reforms that would give children more equal chances to succeed in schools,” Rothstein said. “Unfortunately, the trend is to shift most of the burden to schools, as if they alone can eradicate poverty and inequality.”

Relying upon an assessment of education and economic data, ***Class and Schools*** brings a fresh perspective to the black-white achievement gap by showing how preconceived notions in education policy obscure the gap's true causes. In education, comparisons of similar students usually use only similarities in family incomes while ignoring many other social class characteristics – including access to books and other literacy experiences before children start school, how the nature of parental jobs influences children's intellectual development, and economic insecurity related to other factors besides low income. For example, Rothstein shows, achievement gaps between white and black students of the same income level exist in part because, on average, black families with low incomes are likely to have been poor longer than white families with similar incomes, and because white families are likely to own more assets that can support their children's achievement than black families with the same income.

Some of the book's other findings include:

- Low-income children who disproportionately live in older buildings are five times more likely than middle-class children to have high blood lead levels. Lead poisoning harms cognitive function and behavior, exacerbating the achievement gap.
- Most other countries also have a correlation between student achievement, parental occupation, and home literacy practices. A 2000 international reading survey of 15-year-olds, for example, found the

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gap between the literacy of children of high-status workers (like doctors) and those of low-status workers (like taxi drivers) was even greater in Germany and England than in the United States.

- Persistent racial discrimination in the labor market, which historically has led to a lifetime of reduced average earnings for black workers, can lead some black students to expect less of a payoff for academic effort, lowering their academic achievement.
- Minority children are disproportionately affected by high mobility – having to move a lot because of unemployment or housing quality. Frequently switching classes and teachers makes learning more difficult not only for students who move but for stable students in schools that have high mobility rates. A government survey found that 30% of the nation’s poorest children attended at least three different schools by the third grade; for middle-class students the figure was only 10%. Black children were twice as likely as whites to move this much.
- The push by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* to rely mostly on standardized tests to measure academic success can be ineffective in creating and measuring progress; these tests can sometimes give inaccurate or misleading information about performance and they do not measure non-academic skills, like perseverance or self-discipline, which students equally need for school and job success.

Class And Schools also analyzes claims that some schools and teachers have shown that the test score gap can be closed by more effective instructional practices, and demonstrates that these claims are without foundation. Rothstein concludes that the widely publicized Tennessee value-added assessment system does not in fact show that better teachers alone are all that are required to close the gap. He also explains why some schools and teachers whose success is said to support the idea that demographic factors don't matter (including Pentagon-run schools and students taught by famed Los Angeles teacher Rafe Esquith) don't really disprove that social background figures into academic success.

“This book is essential in the achievement gap discussion because it uses facts and sound research to show that social background has to be in the forefront of policy concern if we want children to succeed,” said Lawrence Mishel, president of the Economic Policy Institute. “Addressing the achievement gap requires no less than a significant transformation of social and labor policy, along with extensive school reform.”

Solving the achievement gap, Rothstein argues, requires improving children’s lives inside and outside the classroom simultaneously. Many widely promoted school improvement policies are valuable but cannot succeed on their own. Academic improvement also requires early childhood, after-school and summer programs to supply enrichment that could narrow the gap in lower and middle-class community and home experiences. And these programs, in turn, cannot fully succeed without policies that narrow the income gap and help lower-class families meet needs such as stable housing and good health care.

"Recent years have brought an avalanche of publications on the achievement gap, characterized much too often by simplistic sound bites and ideological blinders. In contrast, Richard Rothstein's book, drawing on a wealth of previous research, provides the most intelligent, compelling and comprehensive analysis of the causes of the achievement gap I have ever read," said Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University. "He demonstrates that the problem cannot be attributed simply to variations in the quality of the schools attended by children of different races and economic classes. Along the way, he presents evidence debunking the popular myth that there are super-schools capable of eliminating the gap. Presenting study after study, Rothstein highlights the far greater impact of health care, nutrition, parents, home and community."

Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap (210 pp., \$17.95) was produced under a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. It can be ordered online at www.epinet.org or through the EPI Publications Department.

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