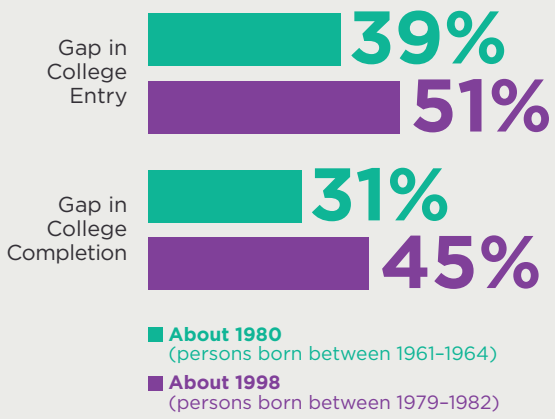
"Once a Leader, U.S. Lags in College Degrees." So rang out a recent headline in the *New York Times* (Lewin 2010). In the 1980s, young people in the United States were more likely to attend and complete college than those in any other nation, but that record has long since been eclipsed. By 2008, 15 other countries had higher proportions of persons between the ages of 25 and 34 with college degrees (Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation [OECD] 2010).

What lies behind these numbers? Is this a story of a stalled society—or of unequal progress across the nation? Further investigation reveals that whereas, on average, 41 percent of U.S. 25- to 34-year-olds hold associate or bachelor's degrees, rates of degree completion are much lower in many states. For example, New Mexico, West Virginia, Louisiana, and Arkansas have rates below 30 percent, far behind on the global scale (Lee and Rawls 2010). Meanwhile Massachusetts, at 54.4 percent, would have ranked fourth in the world rankings.

The disparities are not just geographic. While persons from economically advantaged backgrounds have always gone to college at higher rates than their less-privileged peers, these gaps have expanded since the 1980s (Lee and Rawls 2010). Whereas the difference in college entry between students in the top and bottom income quartiles was 39 percentage points around 1980, it was 51 percentage points by about 1998 (see Figure 1, adapted from Bailey and Dynarski 2011). And differences in college entry between white and Asian students on the one hand and African American and Hispanic students on the other have also widened in recent years (Carnevale and Strohl 2010).

Inequality in education and other domains of life stands in the way of economic and civic progress in the United States. It forestalls social mobility and economic productivity and impairs social cohesion. As a result, national and international leaders—from big-city mayors to Pope Francis—recognize that, as President Obama (2013) put it, inequality is "the defining challenge of our time."

Figure 1. Changes Over Time in College Entry and Completion by Family Income: Differences in Percentage Points between the Top and Bottom Income Quartiles.



Source: Adapted from Bailey and Dynarski (2011), Figure 6.2, p. 120.

Although inequality is pervasive, it can be addressed. One way to reduce inequality over time is to lessen the effects of inequality in one generation on the outcomes of the next. If we can help children from low-income families succeed in school, for example, we may be able to improve their job prospects in the future. Today, we have some good ideas about how to meet this challenge, but there is much more to learn. Hence, the William T. Grant Foundation recently

announced a new initiative to support research on programs, policies, and practices that reduce inequality in youth outcomes in the academic, social, behavioral, and economic realms.

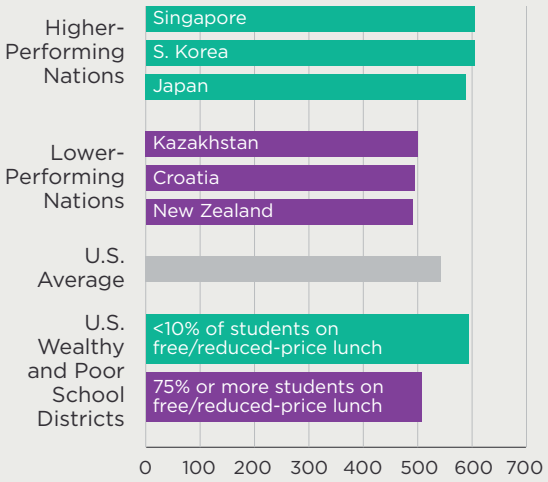
Our interest in inequality extends to many areas of youth development, reflecting disparities in arenas beyond education such as mental health, criminal justice, and workforce development (Alegria, Vallas, and Pumariega 2010; Fader, Kurlychek, and Morgan 2014; Schwartz, Ferguson, and Symonds 2010). This essay uses educational inequality to highlight new ways of thinking about inequality, key leverage points for reducing inequality, and the potential for research to develop more effective responses to inequality.

Growing Achievement Inequality

As with college enrollment, international comparisons of academic achievement often miss the main story. Most headlines focus on the mediocre performance of U.S. students (e.g., Layton and Brown 2012), but this emphasis fails to detect the key problem: test scores in the United States are too unequal. Compared to other countries, the dispersion of achievement in the United States is exceptionally wide, and it is tied to differences in students' economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Examples of wide disparities are easily discernable if one probes beneath the averages. For instance, on the 2011 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), a survey of mathematics and science performance in 55 nations, U.S. fourth graders ranked near the middle in mathematics, comparable to many northern European nations but far below international leaders such as Singapore, S. Korea, and Japan (Provasnik et al. 2012). Yet when the U.S. sample is restricted to school districts with fewer than 10 percent of students on free and reduced-priced lunch—that is, districts with fewer poor students—average scores were equal to those of the top-scoring countries. At the same time, in school districts with 75 percent or more of students on free and reduced-priced lunch—those with the highest concentrations of economically disadvantaged students—average scores were much lower, comparable to lower-performing countries such as Kazakhstan, Croatia, and New Zealand (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Mathematics Test Scores in Selected High- and Low-Performing Nations and in Rich and Poor School Districts in the United States: Fourth Grade Scores on the 2011 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study



Source: Adapted from Provasnik et al. (2012) Tables 3 and 8, pages 10 and

Differences in academic outcomes by socioeconomic origins, as well as by race, ethnicity, and immigration status, have long been recognized. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, a 1966 landmark study of more than 600,000 young people in schools across the United States, established this point definitively, demonstrating that differences in academic outcomes were more closely tied to students' family backgrounds than to the schools they attend (Coleman et al. 1966). These findings have been replicated repeatedly over the past five decades (Gamoran and Long 2007). The recent rise in test-based accountability across the United States has highlighted another dimension of inequality: differences among states. By linking the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, a test administered to a sample of students across the nation) to international benchmarks, researchers at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that state performance levels ranged from those that nearly equaled the world's highest performing nations (e.g., Massachusetts, Vermont, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New Hampshire) to those with scores well below the U.S. average and lower than nearly any other western nation (e.g., Mississippi and Alabama) (NCES 2013; see also Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann 2012).

Achievement differences by income levels have become particularly pronounced in the United States at the present time. As Reardon (2011) has shown, the achievement gap between children from families at the 10th and 90th income percentiles has increased over the last 50 years, and it is now double the size of the black-white achievement gap. Indeed, family income is now as important as parents' education in predicting children's school success. In a recent international study of literacy, socioeconomic differences in performance were greater in the United States than in any other nation (OECD 2013).

Consequences of Inequality

The United States lags behind the top-scoring nations at every performance level, so the mediocre performance of U.S. schoolchildren does not merely reflect low scores at the bottom of our achievement distribution (Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann 2010). Yet it is the prevalence of low performers—more than the dearth of high performers—that is most problematic for economic progress and civil society. Among nations tested, the United States leads the world in the number of low-achieving students and in the number of high performers (Petrilli and Scull 2011). This occurs in part because the population of the United States is large, and in part because the degree of inequality is high. In other words, even though our high-achieving students tend to score lower than the highest achievers of the top-performing nations, we still have an extraordinarily large number of high achievers. As a result, the markers of elite accomplishment in U.S. society are likely to persist. For example, we produce more Nobel Prize winners than any other nation (Bruner 2011; Stephens 2013) and we establish almost as many patents each year as all other nations combined (U.S. Patent and Trademark Office 2012). The U.S. system of higher education continues to be the envy of the world as evidenced by continuing waves of international student enrollment (Project Atlas 2013) and our scientific infrastructure is unparalleled (National Science Board 2012). The prospects for sustained economic and scientific leadership are strong, despite the pressures of international competition (National Research Council 2007).

Meanwhile, students who do not achieve even a basic level of academic performance, or do not complete at least a high school education, are limited in their capacity to contribute to the U.S. economy (Goldin and Katz 2010). Thus, even though our students' average scores fall below those of their counterparts in the highest-performing nations at every achievement level, it is the prevalence of low achievers rather than the shortfall of high achievers that gives greatest cause for alarm. As Belfeld and Levin (2012, p. 2) explained, "purely from an economic perspective—leaving aside important questions of social equity—opportunity is being lost on a large scale."

The drag on economic progress is not the only reason to be concerned about unequal school performance. Educational inequality is also socially divisive, for at least three reasons. First, as sociologists have long recognized (e.g., Durkheim [1925] 1973; Parsons 1959; Dreeben 1968), schooling provides a common socializing experience that forges bonds despite differences in origins. When young people from different backgrounds experience different levels or types of education, schooling cannot instill shared values throughout the U.S. population. Second,