



## Sign of the Times: Through the Lens of the Pandemic

JPIC Department School Sisters of Notre Dame Atlantic-Midwest Province

### Educational Inequalities

The coronavirus pandemic is highlighting systemic inequalities in the United States—inequalities that have always been problematic, and which are being shown now to undermine our nation’s ability to cope with crises. One of these is the educational achievement gap.

The public education system in the United States was a revolutionary concept that improved the lives of generations of Americans and helped to close the achievement gap that limits the upward mobility of minorities and perpetuates the political power of the wealthy. Unfortunately, the gap has stopped closing, and this pandemic is making access to education even more unequal. As Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) Dean, James E. Ryan, says “Our education system, traditionally thought of as the chief mechanism to address the opportunity gap, instead too often reflects and entrenches existing societal inequities.”<sup>1</sup>

As schools make the transition to online learning, they are forced to reckon with the fact that prior to this crisis, approximately 15 percent of households with school-age children reported having no access to internet at home, and 1 in 5 teenagers said they often or sometimes cannot complete assignments because of a lack of reliable internet access or a computer.<sup>2</sup> Further, an estimated 20 million Americans “lack fixed broadband access simply because their neighborhoods don’t have the physical infrastructure to connect.”<sup>3</sup> This holds true in Canada, as well: “particularly in rural communities, the broadband just isn’t there nor the capacity of students to access this kind of learning, he said.”<sup>4</sup> These students, of course, tend to be from low-income and minority families.

Educational inequality often is class-based, but it is exacerbated by race. In educational achievement, the United States comes in around 20<sup>th</sup> of 34 market-based, democracy-leaning countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), but “if [blacks in the U.S.] were to be considered a country, they would rank just below Mexico in last place.”<sup>5</sup> In certain areas, race is a primary indicator of scholastic success: In Washington, D.C., for example, only “8 percent of black eighth-graders are proficient in math, while 80 percent of their white counterparts are.”<sup>6</sup> Schools in the U.S. are more segregated today than in the 1960s,<sup>7</sup> and any educational reforms should address this by “both opening up middle-class and affluent neighborhoods to diverse residents, and improving the quality of existing disadvantaged neighborhoods, not only with better-resourced schools, but with mixed-income housing, transportation access to good jobs, markets that sell fresh food, and walkable options.”<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this, minorities are bearing the brunt of the current public health crisis, since lower levels of education mean jobs with increased risk—for example, jobs with limited options for remote work and limited sick leave. For example, blacks account for 30 percent of Covid-19 deaths,<sup>9</sup> but make up only 13 percent of U.S. citizens.<sup>10</sup> Given that educational opportunity is the single most important factor in closing the achievement gap in the United States, it is imperative that we find ways to ensure that equal access to education is a real guarantee. If online learning is the means through which children are offered an education, then it is morally and economically necessary to provide access to those without it. A failure to do so will mean the exclusion of many low-income and minority families from the very

tools that should offer the means of equality and which will boost our economy by lifting more people out of poverty. As Corydon Ireland, Harvard Correspondent, puts it, “If inequality starts anywhere, many scholars agree, it’s with faulty education. Conversely, a strong education can act as the bejeweled key that opens gates through every other aspect of inequality, whether political, economic, racial, judicial, gender- or health-based.”<sup>11</sup> For the sake of promoting human dignity—as well as public health and economic gains—educational inequalities must be rectified.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/02/the-costs-of-inequality-educations-the-one-key-that-rules-them-all/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2020/03/coronavirus-online-schools-homework-internet-access-homework/608116/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/coronavirus-school-closures-canada-1.5495075>

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/02/the-costs-of-inequality-educations-the-one-key-that-rules-them-all/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/02/the-costs-of-inequality-educations-the-one-key-that-rules-them-all/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/05/17/gao-study-segregation-worsening-us-schools/84508438/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.epi.org/blog/the-coronavirus-will-explode-achievement-gaps-in-education/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://apnews.com/8a3430dd37e7c44290c7621f5af96d6b>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>

<sup>11</sup> <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/02/the-costs-of-inequality-educations-the-one-key-that-rules-them-all/>