Basic argument

The major US education policy initiatives of the past decade — NCLB, test based evaluation of teachers, and support for parental choice and competition -- are misguided.

They deny or set to the side the basic empirical fact that students from disadvantaged families achieve at lower levels than their more advantaged counterparts.

We need a broader and bolder strategy that directly addresses the educational needs of disadvantaged children.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Family background and educational outcomes

Studies based on observations at the student, school, district, state, country all show that low SES is predictive of low educational outcomes

Many measures of socioeconomic status (SES)
  -- Income
  -- Parental education
  -- Parental occupation
Or crude measures or proxies
  -- Eligibility for subsidized lunch
  -- Race of the child

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Explanations for correlation between SES and achievement

- Low SES children tend to have
  - Poor health
  - Families with a lot of stress
  - Language-poor early childhoods
  - Limited access to out-of-school activities
- Low SES families typically are less successful than higher SES families in working the education system to their advantage
- Many of the schools that low SES children attend find it hard to attract and retain high quality teachers.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Recent study by Sean Reardon at Stanford

Use of multiple surveys over the period 1940s to early 2000s, with embedded test scores.

Large and rising gap between achievement levels of children at the 90\textsuperscript{th} and 10\textsuperscript{th} percentiles of the income distribution.

The income gap is now far larger than the achievement gap between white and black students which has been falling.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Within-state analysis over time

NAEP score(std)$_{it}$ = a + b child poverty$_{it}$ + state fixed effects

i = state, t = year ; (6 years, 1998 or 2000 to 2009)

Coefficient b:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>-0.023*</td>
<td>-0.030***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>-0.030**</td>
<td>-0.030***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Turn to international data

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reading scores for 15 year-olds in 2009

Mean of 500 in 2000, standard deviation of 100

Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) of students’ families.

Absolute measure that is comparable across countries

14 countries: U.S. and 13 countries with higher average test scores.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
PISA reading scores (2009) by ESCS Percentile, 14 countries
## PISA test scores and child context, selected countries, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>541</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## PISA test scores and child context, selected countries, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Low ESCS %</th>
<th>Children in poor homes (%)</th>
<th>Child well being index (1-6, high is better)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>20.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Educational outcomes = f(public school quality, context)

• Could apply to a specific school, or system at the district, state or country level.

• Public school quality: difficult to measure.

  Outcomes generally not a good proxy
  
  Best measured by some combination of quality of leadership and teachers, and of processes and practices (See Ladd & Loeb 2013)

• Context refers to SES of students and cultural characteristics (e.g. Finland and Korea); and child well-being (e.g. The Netherlands)
Possible policy responses to this evidence

Assumed goals:
- Raise average achievement
- Reduce achievement gaps

**Policy response 1. Reduce poverty rates**

Particularly important to reduce poverty rates for families with young children

Examples. Macro economic policies, EITC, all out “war on poverty.”

Desirable, but probably not very likely in the current U.S. political environment and will take time

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Policy response 2: Deny the empirical relationship

• How deny? Set same high achievement standards for all students and require all schools to meet the standard, regardless of the mix of students in the school.

• That’s exactly what No Child Left Behind (NCLB) does. (Fed policy, starting 2002)
  
  Goal of 100 percent proficiency
  Schools alone expected to meet the goal

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Possible rationales for denial

- Normative view that schools *should* offset the effects of low SES.
  
  It would be inappropriate – or even immoral – to let schools off the hook just because they serve large concentrations of disadvantaged students.

  *But desirability need not mean feasibility*

- Reluctance to set *lower expectations* for some groups than for others.
  
  Basis of the standards based reform movement: All children can learn to high standards
  
  President Bush: “soft bigotry of low expectations”.

  *But wanting something to be true doesn’t make it true.*
Rationales for denial (cont.)

• Success of some schools means all schools can succeed.
  – Weaknesses in this argument: data do not always confirm success, picking students from right tail of the motivation distribution, hard to scale up the successful schools, e.g. KIPP schools.

Basic denial of the empirical relationship

• Discredit schools and generate pressure for more privatization of the education system.

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Brief evaluation of NCLB

- NCLB is based on flawed logic and is deeply flawed.
- Has not raised student test scores much
  - A little on 4th grade math; unclear for 8th grade math. No effects on reading
- Many undesirable effects: narrowing of the curriculum, many failing schools, low morale among teachers; cheating scandals

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Policy response 3: Set the context aside and make schools more efficient

• Ignore the context, and focus on what education policy makers have control over.
• In practice -- but not by necessity -- raise quality of schools by reducing inefficiencies

Examples

-- NCLB itself.

-- Test based evaluation of teachers

-- Support for more competition and choice

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Test based evaluation of teachers

• The good news: focus on value added measures (measures that acknowledge differences in initial achievement levels)
• But not likely to do much good if the problem is lack of capacity to address children’s needs rather than shirking or other inefficiencies
• In fact, virtually no evidence that the approach will succeed
• And does harm by focusing narrowly on math and reading test scores and reducing teacher morale.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Governance changes to promote efficiency – e.g. charter schools

Some charter schools do address the needs of some disadvantaged children e.g. KIPP
But in general, more appropriate to view charter schools as a governance change that does not specifically address the challenges of educating disadvantaged students. Instead the goal is to promote competition.
Aside from the few highly touted charter schools, charter schools do no better than traditional public schools and many are far less effective. Little or no positive effect on traditional public schools.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Policy response 4: Directly address the educational challenges faced by low SES children

4A. Address the needs of disadvantaged students that impede learning

4B. Assure high quality schools for disadvantaged students

My preferred strategy in the current U.S. political environment.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Policy response 4A

Understand the out-of-school challenges, with attention to causal linkages.

- poor health (Currie, 2009)
- impoverished early childhood
- residential mobility of low income families
- summer learning loss
- maternal depression
- family stress related to job loss

Excellent new research on these topics (see Russell Sage volume, edited by Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane, *Whither Opportunity?*, 2011)

But room for more research

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Illustrative policy interventions

• High quality child care and pre school programs
• Health clinics and counseling services in schools
• Child advocates in every school
• After school and summer programs
  Quality and nature of the programs matter

But, these types of programs will do little good if the schools themselves are low quality.
Policy response 4b: Assure high quality schools for disadvantaged students

• Promote a more even distribution of teacher and leadership quality across schools.
  -- Responsibility of states and districts, not schools

• Hold schools accountable for things under their control and that are consistent with broad goals for education, e.g. quality of internal processes and practices
  -- cf. many other countries that use school inspections, not test based accountability.

Time to reduce the policy focus on outcomes in favor of input and process measures of school quality.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014
Logical policy conclusion: Need a different federal role

This type of policy response

-- will cost money

-- will require governmental agencies to work together

-- will need to be tailored to local contexts.

And will require strong support and leadership from the federal and governments.

Bottom line: NCLB should be replaced with a more positive and constructive approach designed to help state and local policy makers address the educational needs of all children, including disadvantaged children.

Helen F. Ladd, March 2014