At What Cost?
The American Education System

Nearly everyone agrees that education builds the foundation of a great society. It can level the playing field, provide a silver spoon to those born without the advantages of wealth and family, transform lives. Yet when it’s time to discuss concrete educational policies and practices, we find nothing but disagreement. Our institutional arena bogs down in endless bickering as teachers, administrators, parents, students, elected officials, talk show hosts, religious leaders, business and community leaders, and others compete to be heard.

Competing views
The positions championed by advocates on all sides reflect an array of considerations: personal experiences, individual preferences, religious beliefs, political expediency, budgetary concerns, efforts to protect professional turf, ideological views about the proper role of government, and more. Small wonder, then, that our shared commitment to education, when translated into practice, often degenerates into a swirl of contradictory proposals.

Educating the educators
Social and behavioral scientists are uniquely equipped to bring order and reason to the chaos. Their understanding of human development, social institutions, organizations, markets, communities, and cultures enables them to distinguish effectively between proposals based on realistic aspirations grounded in documented scientific understanding of human behavior and society and those based on hoped-for outcomes reflecting wishful thinking. Social and behavioral scientists offer policy makers critical tools for evaluating competing claims about such issues as optimal classroom size; the most effective ways for teaching science, math, or reading; the effects of educational inequality; assessment methods; and a host of other critical issues.

Center contributions
From its inception in 1954, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences has shown a strong commitment to scientific research in education. The Center’s first director, Ralph Tyler, came from the University of Chicago, where he had been dean of one of the premier education schools in the country. Tyler continued his work in the field of education and retained a position of national and international pre-eminence throughout his long and distinguished career.

Since our first year, our Fellows have included scholars whose careers have been devoted to the study of education at all levels, from early childhood to professional schools, and from fields as diverse as cognitive psychology and economics. More than 150 Fellows have devoted their time in residence at the Center to considerations of education in the United States and abroad, making seminal contributions to a broad range of important issues.
For *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, sociologist Christopher Jencks, a Fellow in 1998 and 2002 (and his co-author, Meredith Phillips), conducted the most comprehensive study to date of test differences between blacks and whites. He found, for instance, that poverty has a powerfully detrimental impact on test scores and leads to far-reaching social and economic consequences for African Americans.

James S. Coleman’s (Fellow in 1964) landmark study *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, more familiarly known as *The Coleman Report*, had far-reaching influence on educational policy. Sociologist Coleman surveyed 600,000 children at 4,000 schools in the largest study ever done to determine the effects of racial segregation.

In *The Learning Gap*, psychologists Harold Stevenson (Fellow in 1968, 1983, and 1990) and James Stigler (Fellow in 1990) offer a rigorous comparison between American and Asian elementary schools, concluding that “The American educational system as it currently exists is producing an educationally advantaged minority and a disadvantaged majority.” The authors outline ways in which the United States can benefit from certain aspects of the educational systems of Taiwan, China, and Japan.

Indeed, our roster of former Fellows includes many of the leading figures in the field of education during the second half of the 20th century. Other prominent Fellows in the field of education include:

- Bruno Bettelheim, founder of the Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago and author of *A Home for the Heart*, a book he wrote while he was a Fellow in 1972
- Lawrence Cremin (Fellow in 1965 and 1972), former president of Teacher’s College at Columbia University, president of the Spencer Foundation, and author of a five-volume work on the history of education in the United States from 1607 to the present
- Lee Cronbach (Fellow in 1964), a leading authority on psychological testing and author of *Psychological Tests and Personnel Decisions*
- Swedish educator Torsten Husen (Fellow in 1966 and 1974), one of the leading international authorities on evaluation of talent
- Lee Shulman (Fellow in 1980), professor of education at Stanford University and current president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who is a world-renowned authority on teaching
- Shirley Brice Heath (Fellow in 1989 and 2002), professor of linguistics, English, and education at Stanford University and an expert on literacy
- Yale psychiatrist James Comer (Fellow in 1977 and 1995), author of *Maggie’s American Dream*
- David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, who, as a Fellow in 1969, wrote *The Academic Revolution*, one of the most important studies of higher education in America
- Claude Steele (Fellow in 1995), professor of psychology at Stanford and a leading researcher on the effects of gender and ethnicity on the expectations of students being tested
• Economist Alan Krueger (Fellow in 2000), who has written the most exhaustive study yet on educational performance and class size

• Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner (Fellow in 1995), originator of the theory of multiple intelligences.

The Center’s record of contributions to the advancement of basic knowledge about education through support of scientific research is without rival and our commitment to continuing this effort is without question. Like most Americans, we view education as one of the most important elements of a strong democratic society, and we bring to policy discussions about it an unparalleled rigor and depth of understanding about human behavior and human society.
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