

# Does inequality in school system funding contribute to the cycle of poverty

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol describes the conditions of several of America's public schools. Between 1988 and 1990, Kozol visited schools in approximately 30 neighborhoods and found that there was a wide disparity in the conditions between the schools in the poorest inner-city communities and schools in the wealthier suburban communities. How can there be such huge differences within the public school system of a country which claims to provide equal opportunity for all?

It becomes obvious to Kozol that many poor children begin their young lives with an education that is far inferior to that of the children who grow up in wealthier communities. They are not given an equal opportunity from the start. He writes, "Denial of 'the means of competition' is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities . . ." (p. 83). Although all children are required to attend school until age 16, there are major differences in schools and they appear to be drawn along lines of race and social class.

Kozol examines how the unequal funding of schools relates to social class divisions, institutional and environmental racism, isolation and alienation of students and staff within poor schools, the physical decay of buildings, and the health conditions of students. All of these contribute to a psychological disarray of the young people who recognize that the ruling class views them as expendable and not worth investing its money or resources. Kozol's focus of this book is to examine urban school districts, which are severely segregated by race and class.

They are overwhelmingly nonwhite and very poor, which contrasts sharply with the wealthy overwhelmingly white suburban schools right next to them (p. 74). He limits his selections to poor inner-city schools rather than include examples of all poor schools because he feels that they best exhibit racial segregation and social class divisions. He notes that even when schools have a "diverse" student population, segregation occurs within the school through special education programs or vocational tracking.

Although Kozol does not directly address it, the center of the problems that affect these schools is a capitalist system that requires the reproduction of the divisions of labor (Bowles). Schools provide the training to meet this requirement through the tracking of students into the roles that they will fulfill in our economic system. The ruling class attempts to make sure that there are an appropriate number of people to fit these jobs. Capitalists (i. e. business owners) not only want an obedient workforce, but a surplus of workers at each level so that they can pay the lowest wage possible (Spring, p. 24). They will seek out and encourage programs that train people for such jobs. Who should be assigned each role? Kozol does point out that wealthy white people want to make sure their children get the "good" jobs and live in the "good" (less polluted) areas. They benefit from the divisions of labor and will use their influence to maintain government policies that ensure their positions.

When Kozol discussed funding inequities among school districts with a group of affluent students in Rye, New York, one student exhibited these beliefs when she said she had no reason to care about fixing the problems of school

funding because she failed to see how it could benefit her (p. 126). She indeed recognized how the class divisions were to her advantage. Why would she want to change that? The policies that the ruling class creates to maintain their place on the social class ladder inherently lead to the continuation of the cycle of poverty, social class divisions, and environmental and institutional racism.

Kozol provides examples of this, which range from the location of nonwhite, poor people on and near toxic waste sites (p. 8-12), to blaming problems of the inner city on the people within that system (they are unable to govern themselves, their children aren't worth the money it takes to educate them) (p. 9, 26, 75-76, 192-193), to the funding formula that allocates funds to public schools (54-56, 202, and throughout). It is this unequal funding of public schools that is Kozol's main emphasis in *Savage Inequalities*.

Funding based upon property taxes and property values discriminates against lower social classes, and this unequal funding leads to inferior schools and creates a wide disparity between schools in the poorest and wealthiest communities. Isolation of students, staff, and the community is a direct result of the inequities in funding. People who have poor schooling are funneled into jobs which are poorly paid and so the people not only have less knowledge, but have less money and influence with which to change the system (p. 7). Because they don't know how, nor have the tools necessary to break the cycle of poverty, they continue to reproduce the class divisions and schooling that supports it. This in turn allows their children to be continually tracked and fed into the lower skilled jobs and schooling, which is

a necessary component of the capitalist system. Kozol vividly illustrates the deplorable conditions of the poorest schools. In contrast, he provides colorful descriptions of the wealthiest suburban schools that neighbor them.

He effectively demonstrates the racist conditions and social class discrimination that lead to the variations within the public school system as well as discusses the funding formula for America's public schools. His writing is exaggerated, I am sure, in order to make his point. He had an abundance of information and had to be selective (as anyone would) and when choosing what to include, he used the extreme examples to make his points clear. He may not have included schools because they did not exemplify his point, which is that there is a huge discrepancy in the quality of public schools depending on where one lives.

Yet it still seems that he could have included more. What Kozol should have included was more information on his "research" methods. Perhaps this could be added as an appendix. How many schools did he visit in all? How many were elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools? How would he classify the schools he did visit? How many of the total would he say were very wealthy, awful, or a varying degree in between? Kozol provides descriptions of the worst of the worst, but his research only extends to a limited number of urban schools.

He asks if what he sees is atypical of inner city schools (p. 36). Has he visited enough schools to determine that? It is true that there are those schools out there and they should not be like that, but do they represent the majority of urban schools across the country? He is selective in choosing and describing

the worst of the schools located in the inner city, yet he leaves out any mention of the relative conditions of the other schools in the city. He also fails to include any examples of conditions of poor white suburban and rural schools and schools not at the middle class level.

Perhaps Kozol could also include more on his views as to what the "minimal" requirements for a good school should be. What should all public schools have? He says that there should be more poor schools that resemble the better schools. Are the wealthy suburban schools examples of the minimum that "public schooling" should offer? Or shall they have somewhat less (not necessarily California) while poorer schools get a lot more? Are there minimum educational experiences that all students could expect in any public school?

If parents wanted more than was provided by the public schools, they could demand more (for all) or they could provide tutoring or a private education for their children. Kozol suggests equalized funding as a solution to the lack of quality in urban schools. Funding alone will not solve the schools. There needs to be changes in the greater society that would have to occur simultaneously for real improvements to occur. Besides, equal funding does not mean equal schools. Would policy makers really want equal funding?

If politicians really valued public education and believed in doing what would provide equal funding for ALL, plenty of money would "become available." Perhaps my greatest problems with *Savage Inequalities* are that Kozol does not deeply examine why things got the way they have as they relate to the purposes of schooling as described by Joel Spring (p. 18-26), and Kozol is all

talk, no action. While he was visiting these schools, did he attempt to organize the schools, teachers, parents, and students? He observed the schools and was able to highlight the inequities present, but did he do anything?

He had an ideal opportunity to initiate some organizing of those involved, yet the book does not suggest that he did much more than visit the schools and report back what he saw, heard, and felt. Since only part of the problem, albeit a large part, is how the schools are funded, one would need to look beyond the education system to find a solution which would really rectify the problems Kozol describes. Schools cannot truly be reformed without "reforming" the societal conditions that surround the schools.

The schools are the way they are for a purpose--to reproduce the social divisions of labor (Bowles) and to maintain the capitalist economy of our country. When discussing how to solve problems of unequal funding, Jezebel, an eleventh grade student at Woodrow Wilson School in Camden, New Jersey addresses segregation and says that even if funding were the same, schools will not be equal. A very insightful young lady, she recognizes the degree to which the ruling class will prevent a fair education system and desegregation from developing as she realistically suggests that "it would take a war to bring us together" (Kozol, p. 55). Short of that, it is unlikely that these problems will be solved through any reform effort. To begin to solve the problems, people need to collectively stand together and fight for the rights of all the children to have an equal start in life. That means people need to know what is going on and that they can do something to change it. Kozol

was right about that when he suggested that people may be more willing to revise the system if they understood how it worked (107), but how do you get people to look beneath the veil? Fifty-five years ago, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *Brown v.*

Board of Education case that school segregation policies are unconstitutional. Yet despite the moral victory of the *Brown* decision, in the decades since 1954 we have failed to create educational equality in America. Despite countless initiatives, hundreds of billions of dollars invested in various school improvement efforts, and the passage of a federal law that mandates that no child be left behind, we continue to see gaps in educational opportunity that disproportionately impact the lives of low income communities and communities of color across the fifty states. How can this be?

In the wealthiest nation on earth, that has professed its commitment to eliminating these gaps for more than half a century, how can such glaring inequities persist? While we have gone to great lengths to experiment with education reform, we have done little to address the web of related social issues that together create the conditions necessary for educational success. We have spent our time and money focusing on things like toughening standards for students, making it harder to become a licensed teacher, and holding failing schools accountable for poor performance.

And while many of these reform efforts have had some generally positive impact on the quality of education our children receive, all of these reforms ignore the fact that no matter what we do in schools, students still live their



lives in communities that reflect the systemic economic, racial and environmental inequalities that our society has yet to resolve. Like a patient with pneumonia who takes larger and larger doses of cough syrup and then wonders why they're not getting better, we find ourselves treating primarily the symptoms of educational inequality rather than the root causes.

If we hope to change our educational fortune, our society will need a cure that actually attacks the problem where it exists. It is only through a structural analysis of education that we can understand how issues like housing, school funding systems, and employment interact to shape our children's ability to succeed in school. Let's start by looking at the issue of housing. There is perhaps no single greater factor in determining one's educational experience than where you live.

Despite the moral victory of Brown, for the average low income black and Latino student in America today, schools are only marginally less segregated than they were in 1954 and are growing more segregated every year. <sup>1</sup> We have replaced the system of racial segregation with a system of residential segregation. Low-income blacks and Latinos are not explicitly forbidden from attending more affluent, majority-white schools because of their race, they are forbidden from attending because they are unable to secure housing in districts where affluent, high-functioning schools exist.

This system, first declared constitutional by the Supreme Court in the 1974 case *Miliken v. Bradley*, essentially means that middle class and wealthy white communities need only to prevent low income people and people of color from moving into their districts in order to maintain segregated

schools. Even cities that have sought to voluntarily integrate schools, like Seattle and Louisville, have been thwarted by recent conservative Court rulings. In actuality then, the great dream of integrated schools in America not only never fully materialized, what little progress had been made is being undone before our eyes. For many low income communities and communities of color, little has ever happened to disrupt what has for generations been a schooling experience defined by crumbling infrastructure, poor quality teaching, lack of resources for arts, music, athletics, and extracurricular activities, and high concentrations of poverty along with all of its destabilizing effects on the lives of children.

To fully understand the structural connections between educational opportunity and housing, first we must understand how schools receive funding. The primary source of funding for most school systems is property taxes. This means wealthy districts with high property values not only have more to spend on education, they can actually tax themselves at lower rates than their less affluent counterparts and still raise more money for schools.

Even within school districts with diverse populations, providing equal per pupil funding for schools that serve populations with dramatically different needs can result in schools that reinforce, rather than reduce, inequality. In New York City for example, where per pupil funding is constant<sup>3</sup> in the public schools throughout the city, schools that serve students who come to school with a range of academic and social needs that are not being met at home are at a perpetual disadvantage when compared to schools that serve students from more affluent and less needy areas.

The Bronx, for example, when compared to the other boroughs of New York city is notable for being home to the neighborhoods with the city's highest concentrations of poverty, adult incarceration, unemployment, and adults who themselves have not attained a high school diploma. 4 Given these social factors, it is a virtual certainty that, on average, students from the Bronx will come to school with greater need for academic, social and emotional support than their less challenged counterparts in wealthier areas of the city. The Bronx also has the lowest rates of home ownership in New York City, making students especially likely to change residences and schools multiple times. 4 Studies have shown this kind of mobility to be a strong indicator of low performance. 5 It is no surprise then that the Bronx has the lowest rates of students performing at grade level on standardized tests in Math and English in New York City. 4 Because of modern school segregation, low-income students not only struggle with poverty related issues at home but generally receive an inferior education at school as well.

This combination creates a sense of hopelessness and the perception that the benefits of education cannot be realized among many in these communities. This leads many students to achieve below their potential and to disengage from school, leaving them with few opportunities for gainful employment or to secure housing in an area where better schools could serve their own children in the future. Together these structural forces create a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty (both economic and educational) that disproportionately impacts the lives of people of color in America. The problems we face in closing gaps in educational opportunity and outcomes are not purely the result of inaction, or lack of effort, but rather the

misunderstanding of the source of the problem. To succeed in eliminating educational inequality in this country we must begin to address the social and economic conditions in low income and minority communities. The prospect of this kind of systemic change can seem daunting, but here are three ways we can begin addressing the issue: Employment

Create strong incentives for businesses that locate long term, living wage, environmentally friendly employment opportunities in low income and minority communities. In cities like New York, low-income minorities often live in areas with few opportunities for gainful employment. 4 This compounds their geographic isolation, increases adult and teen unemployment, and forces parents to spend more time commuting to jobs in which they earn low wages.

The presence of stable, living wage earning jobs in low income communities not only improves the economic fortunes of the area, it also provides a critical mass of role models who can reinforce for students the value of educational achievement. Health Care One of the more disastrous byproducts of poverty is many parents' inability to support their child's development and achievement in school. With inadequate access to physical and mental health care, vision testing, and nutritional counseling, many parents in low income and minority communities are unable to offer their children the support they need to be prepared for success in school.

We would likely see greater gains in educational achievement among low income and minority students by investing in community support services like universal health care, school-based vision clinics, and mental health

services, than we see from the billions we currently spend on No Child Left Behind reforms. 5 Housing Integration Simply put, we will not likely be able to achieve educational equality without a dismantling of the new class and race based separate-but-equal school system being reestablished in America.

The best way to ensure school integration is through housing integration. To achieve this we need rigorous enforcement of the long neglected 1968 Fair Housing Act, which contains provisions to ensure municipalities structure housing policy in ways that don't reinforce racial segregation. In addition, we need a comprehensive, national strategy to ensure that as affluent whites move back into city centers, and blacks and Latinos are priced out of gentrifying areas and into the suburbs, we don't simply shift populations in still segregated schools. 1