

You Can't Fight Poverty If the Kids Can't Read

June 30, 2011

When it comes to the matter of the role of high-quality education in stemming poverty, the thoughtlessness on the subject is rather bipartisan. Bring in the question of whether every child should be given a rigorous, college preparatory education, along with the idea that every child should attain postsecondary education, and the mindlessness becomes astounding. This truism was proven once more this week amid the publication of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce's [latest report](#) on the need to increase the number of college-educated American children. From Deborah Meier's latest anti-intellectual [defense](#) of the status quo (on a blog she shares with Diane Ravitch that should be called "Thoughtless Minds Think Alike"), to the [meanderings](#) of the usually more-thoughtful Neal McCluskey of the reform-minded Cato Institute, their general complaint is that there is no economic or social value for kids supposedly uninterested in college. And ultimately, that providing kids with college preparatory education (and encouraging them to attend college or some other form of higher education) is rather wrongheaded.

One can at least say that McCluskey is partly right about this: There isn't necessarily any magic in attaining a degree, especially if one's goal is to go into fields such as the Humanities, where the possibilities of attaining a decent-paying job is unlikely. But liberal arts, social science and history degrees only account for 15 percent of all baccalaureate degrees awarded in 2008-2009, according to the U.S. Department of Education; high-paying fields such as business, health-related fields, education, biological sciences, engineering and computer science account for half the baccalaureates earned by collegians. Let's also be clear that there is plenty wrong with America's higher education system. (I have noted some of those problems this month in my report for Organization Trends on for-profit colleges.) But those problems don't negate the value of higher education, especially for poor and minority children.

But at least McCluskey is coming from a good place. He actually wants high-quality school options for all children. Meier, on the other hand, is like her *EdWeek* colleague: Ready to damn poor kids with low expectations and using condescending nostalgia about a student that chose to go into law enforcement to justify her point. The fact that one young man did manage to get into one of the few middle-class careers that didn't require college or technical school (even though police academies are, in fact, higher ed institutions of a sort) doesn't prove her point. (The fact that her own grandchildren are attending college disproves her argument entirely.) And given the educational requirements to succeed in law enforcement (which involve abstract thinking), along with the fact that college education is required for attaining more-prestigious positions in that field (including serving with the FBI), even aspiring cops can use college preparatory education.

For anyone to say that encouraging kids to pursue higher education — and thus, provide all children a college preparatory education — is ridiculous. Especially when it comes to our kids who grow up in the poorest urban and rural communities. Higher ed has value for the kids and the communities in which they live.

As **Dropout Nation** has noted, the math and science skills needed to get into college and white-collar fields are also needed in high-paying blue-collar fields such as welding and elevator installation (which one can only get into if they attend other forms of higher education such as community colleges, technical schools and apprenticeships). The jobs that those with some form of higher education can attain is often higher-paying than that for those who only finished high school or worse, just dropped out.

The value of higher education in bolstering incomes is especially clear when one looks at its impact on income for blacks and Latinos. A black man or woman with some form of college

education will earn at least \$9,142 more in annual income than their dropout counterpart; the gap grows both with additional higher ed credentials and as the better-educated person attains experience in the workforce in higher-paying fields. Those additional dollars flow into the economies of the communities in which they live, spurring home ownership, entrepreneurial pursuits and the emergence of middle-class families on whose energies and dollars civil society is dependent.

For a lower middle-class black community such as the one in which I grew up, South Ozone Park in New York City (part of the zip code 11436), those additional higher ed credentials equals a decline in poverty. If just a third of the 3,110 residents living below poverty had attended college for at least two years, they would triple their income and contribute at least an additional \$20 million a year in income to their neighborhoods (and more if they reach the nation's median annual income). If every one of the 1,276 kids under age 5 went to college and returned to the community, that would be an additional \$36 million in annual income.

Such numbers seem small on their face, and yes, these quick-and-dirty estimates don't account for such things as migration and neighborhood transition. But even for this blue-collar community, where many of the residents are employed in high-paying jobs and own homes, higher education equals more men and women who can help sustain the area. In the case of the kids, it means avoiding poverty and prison in their adulthood.

If this is true for South Ozone Park, it is also the case for Eight Mile in Detroit, for rural Liberty, New York, and for our poorest communities.

This is just the economic impact. For most of us, the campuses of colleges and technical schools are the places where we build the connections that lead to career opportunities and fulfilling friendships. Then there is the knowledge — from the courses on economic theory to the simple lessons about navigating life outside of the communities in which one had grown up — that is even more value. Well-educated men and women beget learned children who continue economic renewal. And for those who live in poor communities where optimism is in short supply, watching neighbors achieve higher education and economic success brings the bright light of hope they need to move their kids on up.

Attaining higher levels of education alone won't ensure happier lives. But for minorities, acquiring at least some college education often means the difference between being able to feed their children or subsist. And for the communities in which they live, education, along with low crime, and the flourishing of entrepreneurship and free markets, is the most-effective form of long-term economic development — and it is cheaper over time than costly tax increment subsidies. One would dare say if cities such as Detroit, Philadelphia and Newark devoted more civic energy to school reform than to tax abatements and stadium deals, they wouldn't be facing the economic abyss.

This reality is why rigorous, college-preparatory education at the K-12 level, and the implicit expectation for all children that they must attain higher education, is critical. It is also why we must improve reading instruction and make sure that every child is literate.

For our poorest kids, especially those in black and Latino households, the education they receive at all levels is critical to brighter, less-economically impoverished futures and wider social options. And for the communities in which they live, it can mean the difference between vibrance and continued decay.