

Equity, Education, and Philanthropy in Changing Times

By Lynn Huntley

Defining Equity

Equity is a term that derives its meaning from context and the intentions and vantage points of those who use it. As used in the field of education, the term connotes a sense of fairness, a striking of a reasonable balance between competing interests, groups, forces and/or dynamics in order to serve the common and overarching good. Of course, since notions of common good are variable and often conflated with self- or group-interest, "where one stands on equity issues in education depends frequently on where one sits." Put simply, the term means different things to different people.

One thing is certain. Equity is not necessarily the same thing "equal" in all settings. As the chair of the Board of the Southern Education Foundation's Board of Trustees, Dr. Norman C. Francis, has noted:

There is a major difference between equity and equality...In the educational arena, Blacks [and other low income groups] are not on a level playing field. Let me illustrate what I mean. In basic mathematics, if you add equal amounts to both sides of an unequal equation, it will remain unequal. Put differently, the only way to achieve what is appropriate if two glasses are unequally filled with water is not to pour equal amounts into each glass, but to pour equitable amounts into each glass. That might mean pouring 50 percent into one glass and 25 percent into the other, but you do what you have to do until you have achieved equity. This is the critical public policy issue we confront today—how to achieve equity in educational opportunity.

The Importance of Educating the "New Majority"

Finding ways to achieve excellence and fairness in the allocation of education resources is an urgent matter, especially in the South, whose public elementary and secondary schools are now serving a *new majority—low income students*. Of the 18 states with the greatest number of the public school students eligible for free or reduced price lunches, a measure of poverty, 13 are in the South. These students will in the future be an ever expanding part of the labor and talent pool on which the South will rely to meet its economic needs. If the South doesn't find ways to "mainstream its millions of low-income, underachieving students," as one Atlanta businessman put it, "we are all doomed."

Compared to other regions, the South has:

- forty-one percent of the country's poor students;
- school drop out rates as high as 50 percent in many places;
- the lowest aggregate student standardized test scores in almost every subject matter;

- low per capita public elementary and secondary education expenditure rates, although levels are increasing. Southern states are spending more dollars per pupil than they did a decade ago, but, with few exceptions, the portion of state budgets allocated to education is shrinking;
- low rates of college attendance with only about 1 out of 5 persons aged 25 and over with a bachelors' degree, compared to the national average of 1 in 4;
- low levels of need-based scholarship aid for low income and "average" college aspirants, despite the fact that most people are "average" and most jobs in the future require some degree of post-secondary education.

In the global marketplace in which our region and nation must function, a highly skilled labor force is the key to economic competitiveness and a good quality of life for all of the South's residents. Industries that pay livable wages do not locate in places where people lack the skills necessary to fill jobs and are unable to buy the goods and services produced. Capital is not invested in communities where children of workers cannot receive a good quality public education. Investment capital flees from communities where despair, poverty, crime and lack of opportunity stalk the streets. States with lots of poorly educated, low earning residents do not generate the high tax revenues needed for infrastructure and public services.

Most importantly, education is the means by which democratic practices and governance are strengthened and participation informed. When apportioned fairly, equitably, education provides people with skills needed to pursue and achieve the American Dream and enjoy and exercise cherished freedoms guaranteed by the United States Constitution.

Barriers to Equity in Education Opportunity

The South's public elementary and secondary schools have educated middle class and affluent students reasonably well. No, these public schools don't have the prestige of pricey private schools. Unlike private schools, they have "open enrollment" policies. But the public schools serving affluent students continue for the most part to prepare such students for success in the workforce or college, have good careers, gain jobs that pay decent wages and enjoy a reasonable standard of living. Could these schools be improved? Of course. Still, the South's greatest need is for improvement in the public schools that serve the middle class, if the aim is to achieve the greatest good. It is the public schools that serve the new majority that are most in need of improvement.

The South has always underinvested in the education of its low income residents for many reasons:

- its agrarian and manufacturing history which thrived on the labor of masses of low skilled, under- and uneducated people;
- the deep engrained pattern of denial of quality education to sons and daughters of the formerly enslaved, who even today still are largely found in racially identifiable schools. This encouraged out-migration for many years of talented and productive Blacks to other parts of the nation, although this pattern has now been reversed;

- White flight from schools and neighborhoods subject to desegregation mandates and weakening of judicial enforcement in this area, resulting in class and racial isolation in many venues and the loss of leaders and allies for improvements in public education systems for all;
- aversion to taxation and big government involvement in the educational enterprise and a preference for state and local control; and
- a culture and traditions that encourage "suspicion" of intellectuals.

In addition, since many of the burgeoning number of low-income students in the South are undocumented Latinos or other immigrants and African Americans, many affluent taxpayers don't see increased investment in public education as something of importance. What would the debate about Southern public education be if most of its affluent and/or White students attended the public schools?

Another major contributing factor to the abiding pattern of education inequality in the South (and elsewhere in the nation for that matter) is the way in which public education is financed. Since property taxes are the primary means by which basic public elementary and secondary school costs are defrayed, augmented by state taxes (the federal contribution is only about 10 percent of the funds spent on public education in the aggregate annually), low income school districts don't have as much money to spend per capita on education services as more affluent districts. These disparities in amounts available for infrastructure, teacher salaries, technology, coursework, professional development, counseling and other purposes ensure that some schools are far better than others. It also ensures that some students gain competitive advantages over others in seeking higher education access. Even when state governments provide funds to equalize per capita expenditures between districts, equal is not necessarily equitable, since low income students are likely to need extra help, given familial and community deficiencies, in order to close the achievement gap. Disparities between districts can total as much as \$400,000 per capita over the 12 years of education of a child!

The inequality in inputs and outputs also exists between and among states, as there are rich and poor states and wide variation in amounts allocated for education. Thus, *inequality by geography* exists between and among the states that comprise the nation.

While money is not a solution to every ill afflicting public school, few would argue that it is unimportant. There is a reason why tuitions to excellent private schools are high.

The fact is that the pace of change in the world around us, demographic shifts in regional composition, the proliferation of knowledge and technology, globalization, the civil and human rights revolution, and other such major developments have created a need to rethink and fine-tune public education just like everything else. There is no final or quick "fix" for public education because every day and year presents new problems, new students with needs, new opportunities and new challenges. Improving education is a continuous, unending process.

There are a number of worthy efforts underway, within and outside of the nation's systems of public elementary and secondary education, that are moving the system in a positive direction toward equity. Among them are efforts to reduce drop outs, increase rates of college going,

revise curricula, restructure public education delivery systems, integrate technology into the region's classrooms, and recruit and train better more teachers. Active efforts are underway to redefine the role of educational leadership, respond to diversity and immigration questions, fine-tune accountability measures, reset standards, enhance the capacities of some schools to meet particular needs of discrete groups of students, and empower communities through organizing to reengage with schools and demand improvements. There is fresh attentiveness to the need to expand publicly supported early childhood education programs to ensure school readiness, advance parental engagement and after-school programs. There have been over 40 lawsuits filed nationwide, many in southern states, challenging the "inadequacy" of education services provided to low income students and remedies ordered to implement remedies requiring improvements. Studies abound on every conceivable subject. Still, the distance left to traverse is long, the cost of undoing the legacy of past underinvestment remains high, the pattern of improvement is uneven, and complexity abounds.

Philanthropy's Role in Education in the South

In the South, one of the nation's most impoverished regions, the number of foundations is growing, reflective of national trends. The expansion of institutions of organized philanthropy is fuelled by economic expansion at the top and the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a small swath of rich Americans. As people of wealth or profitable businesses determine what to do with "excess" resources, philanthropy—the impulse to share with others (whether for personal satisfaction, public recognition, or strategic business reasons)—is awakened. New entries are added each day to swell the ranks of organized philanthropy.

What do these donors support in the area of education? Lots of things.

- *Demonstration Projects*—While many of the innovative education demonstration projects in the South emanated from northern donors, southern donors, both individual and foundations, have begun to participate in such efforts. Many such projects seek to demonstrate that with proper attention, quality teaching, good facilities, improved educational leadership, high expectations, more parental involvement and other supports, low income students can achieve to high standards. The hope is that such efforts will be replicated with public funds down the road.
- *Technology Initiatives*—Gifts of computers and software to schools and/or the training of teachers/faculty offers the promise to enhance student learning outcomes.
- *Teacher Recruitment or Training*—Believing that the problem of many schools is poorly trained teachers, some foundations make investments in teacher recruitment and experimental preparation efforts. A few are involved in major restructuring efforts involving curriculum at colleges and schools of education.
- *Leadership Development*—Convinced that education administrators at all levels are a resource that needs to be tapped in support of education improvements, a number of donors are focused on education leadership development related to teachers, superintendents and principals to help them meet new challenges and guide adaptation of education structures and policies to them.

- *Education Support Efforts*—Whether in the form of after-school or mentoring programs, reading tutorial or other related activities, a growing number of donors, especially those which are locally focused, are involved in supporting direct services for students.
- *Community Organizing*—Arising out of a belief that without a "demand" dynamic, there will not be an adequate "supply" of quality education for low income students and in order to vitalize community engagement in education, some foundations support diverse community-based groups and organizers. Such groups advance understanding about the need for education, issues, problems and strategies. In this context, the focus is sometimes on issues of race and ethnicity.
- *Research*—An emphasis upon data driven decision-making and actions undergirds much giving by foundations. Research on discrete issues—even research on the impact of research—is appealing to "bottom line" oriented donors.
- *Law and Policy Reform*—A few donors support litigation and advocacy activities. For example, a spate of recent lawsuits challenging the inadequacy of education afforded to low income students and seeking redress of diverse types—more funding, better facilities, bilingual education—are now pending or court ordered remedies being implemented in many southern states.
- *Policy Advocacy*—In light of the welter of policy proposals bandied about in education, some donors seek to inform the policy dialogue by helping affected groups have a voice in shaping the policies that will provide the contours for education in the South and the nation.
- *Scholarships*—Responding to the opportunity to put a human face on their philanthropy, many donors provide scholarships to individuals or schools.
- *Capital Improvements*—Support, especially in higher education, for building repairs and construction, technology accommodation is appealing to donors and accounts for a large percentage of the aggregate gifts made in education in the South.
- *Education Restructuring and Curriculum Revision*—Efforts to restructure middle schools or develop early college programs are gaining currency as a way of helping more students complete high school and go on to college.

Even this long list is incomplete and cannot do justice to the many ways in which diverse donors are engaged with the educational enterprise and playing a salutary role in helping to strengthen outcomes, policies and practices. A number of these initiatives are in essence "charitable" good works, education improvement oriented, catalytic or civic-oriented, the categories of philanthropic engagement suggested by Elizabeth Lynn and D. Susan Wisely in "Toward A Fourth Philanthropic Response: American Philanthropy and its Public." The taxonomy of philanthropy that they propose recognizes that categories overlap. Nothing is clear or sharp in education reform or life.

Of Southern philanthropies, there are few, however, with a region-wide emphasis and focus on education of the new majority. The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) is unique in this regard. The South's oldest education philanthropy, SEF is a public charity which traces its origins back to 1867. Singular by virtue of mission, longevity and minority group leadership, SEF is the only education- and low income student-focused philanthropy with a regional focus and primary mission to advance equity and excellence in Southern education, from pre-school through higher education. The history of major Southern education developments and SEF's

work in relation thereto, then and in contemporary times, may be found at www.southerneducation.org.

Wanted: A New Vision for Philanthropy in Education

Philanthropy's impact must be measured by the success and strength of grantees. There is a growing trend among many foundations, however, in the name of maximizing impact, to operate programs themselves or cherry pick only a few institutions to act as the agents of implementation of foundation-designed programs. While there is value in such efforts, it is important to ask whether this trend, if continued, will ultimately disserve the aims for which foundations were originally established—to strengthen and enhance civil society by ensuring breadth and quality in the entire independent sector. As it is, the South has, relatively speaking, a lean and resource-starved non-profit education-oriented infrastructure, compared to other parts of the nation. If foundations continue to assume the roles that their grantees and others in the non-profit sector used to fulfill, the entire sector and other civil society institutions will be further diminished.

Philanthropy's resources for education are small in relation to the multi-billion dollar public and private education system over which it seeks to exercise influence. The South's foundations, many of them bound by founder guidelines that favor 'traditional' philanthropic activity—charitable or improvement oriented—are very important contributors to education, especially in the capital improvement area, but the list of foundations involved in catalytic philanthropy or even civic philanthropy is not as long as one might wish.

Demographers estimate that by the year 2025, 40 percent of the people resident in the South will be non-White. Currently, Southern public school students are 46 percent non-white. If current trends continue, many will join the ranks of the South's poor. The demographic shift will also include rapid growth of the very old and the very young. The latter will fuel the need for more support for better education and the former will be ever more disinclined to be responsive to such demands.

Tax and social policy, including education policy, continue to contribute to growth in wealth inequality. As costs of education at all levels, public and private, from pre-school through higher education continue to escalate, poor students will need more and more help. Quality education will become the domain of "them that's got" if we are not careful.

With the scale of educational needs, failings and possibilities in view and in comparison to the role and work of education philanthropy in the South, leaders in philanthropy would be well served to rethink how best to deploy scarce resources, now and in the future.

There is too much unwillingness on the part of some philanthropists to make bold, publicly visible commitments to help improve education for the children who need help the most by tackling the deeply embedded structures that sustain education inequality and inequity. Why is there so little foundation support in the South for non-partisan voter education and registration efforts to help people understand the great policy issues of the day and the choices before them? Why is there such limited support for the rural school districts that are suing their states to try to get the resources to give their rural students an equitable chance to receive a quality education?

Why do donors shy away from policy research and hard-edged advocacy on matters such as education finance systems? Why do the region's 76 historically Black colleges that continue to provide four-year degrees to almost 20 percent of all African Americans who receive degrees and 40 percent of those who receive degrees in vital subjects such as mathematics, science and technology receive such puny support from foundations? Why are so few donors focused on the needs of the uneducated immigrants who are flooding into the South and who, like it or not, are our neighbors and our future?

Philanthropic institutions hold a valuable public trust. Their contemporary challenge is to help the public move beyond the belief that education is primarily an individual good toward recognition that education is a first order of magnitude social good! In *Stacked Deck, A Story of American Selfishness*, author Lawrence Mitchell reminds us that poverty does not necessarily reflect a lack of character, lack of commitment to hard work, lack of dreams or lack of direction. Most people are poor because they lack education.

Most who will read this piece enjoy the benefits of a good education. How much money would you trade it for? All that you know others have taught you. Let us work to extend quality education opportunity, equitable opportunity, to all of the South's people, for our own sakes and for theirs.

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