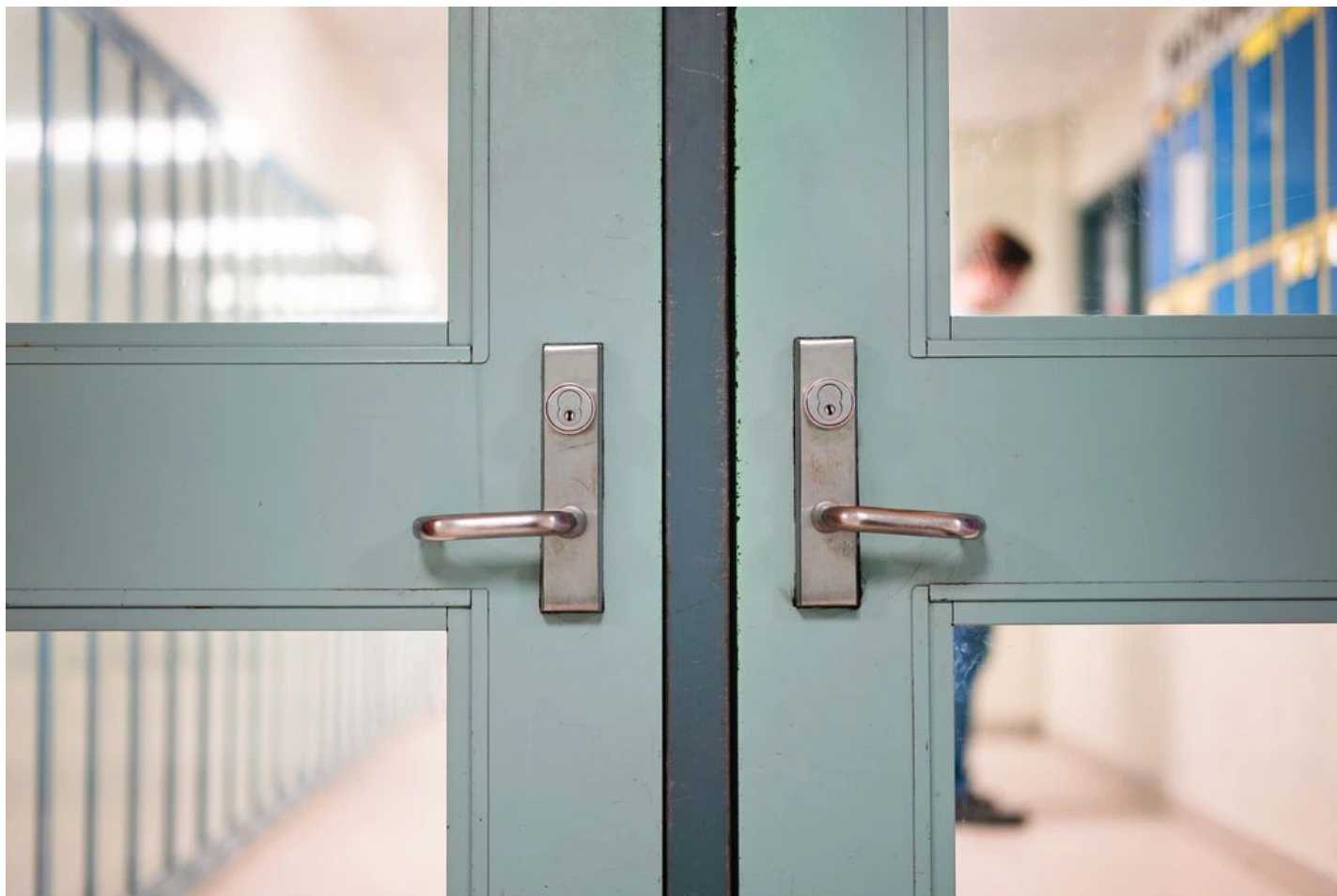


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Want to address inequality? Stop waiting for schools to solve everything

The education system has long reinforced the divide between rich and poor, and Boston's history proves it.

By **Cristina Viviana Groeger** Updated September 28, 2021, 1 hour ago



ADOBE STOCK

About a month into another school year marred by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and families are facing renewed anxiety over [“learning loss”](#) — the idea that time away from in-person schooling will leave young people behind, with dire consequences. This

anxiety is understandable: Remote learning has been [gravely unequal](#) across

communities, and for students, lower educational attainment is associated with an array of challenges down the road, including [reduced lifetime earnings](#).

Hand-wringing over learning loss is often based on the premise that, in an era of skyrocketing inequality, schooling can level the playing field. This, of course, is nothing new: Horace Mann, a public school champion in the 1800s, called education the “great equalizer.” Today, the view informs President Biden’s priorities: the largest spending increase of his proposed 2022 budget would [go toward education](#).

Schools, certainly, are a public good worthy of investment. In addition to fostering critical academic skills, they are, at their best, spaces for developing curiosity, creativity, and collaboration with others. And education level is undeniably linked to economic outcomes: While the real wages of those without a high school diploma have been declining since the 1970s, those of college graduates [have been rising](#).

Despite this, however, the reality is that education is no panacea for inequality. As an historian, I’ve spent years researching education systems in Boston and found that, even as schools offer social benefits for many, schooling can also help entrench the divide between rich and poor. A focus on education as a policy fix can take attention away from policies actually responsible for rising inequality today.

As I explore in my book [The Education Trap](#), the history of Boston schools challenges our national faith in the power of education in several ways. First, expanding educational access has not always promoted economic equality. Instead, as the general education level has risen, it has triggered a reaction among elites, who have concentrated the economic benefits of education at the top.

Case in point is early 20th-century Boston, when public high schools boomed and new demographics of students, especially white women and second-generation immigrants, used schools to enter growing sectors of white-collar work. Through alumni networks and

used schools to enter growing sectors of white-collar work. Through alumni networks and university placement services, “Boston Brahmin” elites forged new relationships with New England universities to use advanced degrees to control access to the best-paying jobs in business, engineering, and law. In 1880, most businessmen or engineers had not attended college, and lawyers rarely attended professional school. Just a few decades later, these business and professional elites were creating new pathways from bachelor’s and master’s degrees to management positions, and from law schools into corporate law. Today, we see similar forms of [“opportunity hoarding”](#) by the wealthy, whose children disproportionately attend the [most exclusive schools and universities](#).

A second assumption challenged by historical evidence is that more education automatically translates to higher wages. This equation was proven too simplistic over a century ago, when reformers in Boston, certain that low-wage workers were paid little because they were “unskilled,” tried to elevate the status and pay of occupations such as domestic service through occupational training. Students did not enroll, and these training programs flopped. The reformers had failed to factor in critical power dynamics at play. Discrimination has long kept some communities — recent immigrants and Black Americans — relegated to low-wage jobs, regardless of education level. Child care and domestic labor require significant skill, but their low wages reflect the devaluation of jobs typically done by women.

Another historical lesson is that schooling has often served employers’ interests at the expense of workers. In the early-20th century, Boston manufacturers were eager to circumvent strong craft union apprenticeship regulations around pay and length of training. These rules allowed unions to control entry into the trades and ensured that youth workers received quality training and were not exploited. For employers, however, these regulations hampered their power and flexibility. One solution for employers was “industrial education” regimes in schools, which were free to employers and came without the ideological influence of unions.

While Boston’s craft unions were powerful enough to limit the expansion of industrial education, employers ultimately shifted their workforces away from expensive, unionized

craftworkers and toward nonunionized machine operators and clerical staff who received academic educations in schools. Today, this lesson should raise questions about the continued role of schools in workforce training. Discussions of career preparation usually focus on skills that make students more attractive to employers, and very little on skills that might prepare students to fight for workplace justice.

The 20th century showed us that when it comes to equality, what matters most is not education, but the power of workers on the job. Levels of education and social inequality rose simultaneously through the 1920s, but between 1940 and 1970, social inequality fell. Many have attributed this decline primarily to the [expansion of public education](#). However, other factors played an essential role. In particular, powerful industrial unions organized workers across skill level, race, ethnicity, and gender to push employers to pay living wages and offer good working conditions. These workers provided the base of political support for federal social programs and the taxation necessary to fund them. The decline of income inequality in this period [tracks almost perfectly](#) with the rise of mass union membership. Likewise, the rise of income inequality since the 1970s tracks with the erosion of unions across the private sector.

Education policy cannot fix inequality alone, but schools can play a key role in structural reforms. While Biden's education policies are typically couched in the language of [human capital](#) — the concept that increased skills and knowledge translate into higher future earnings — components of his [American Families Plan](#) would have direct labor market consequences. Expanding early childhood education, for example, would serve as essential child care, giving a special lift to women who have taken on the burden of unpaid care work during the pandemic. The plan would also invest in teachers, who have themselves been at the forefront of [labor organizing during the pandemic](#) and are helping rebuild workers' collective power across the country. Meanwhile, policy makers should focus on structural reforms that tackle social inequality head on, such as [shoring up labor rights](#), implementing [universal basic income](#) and [paid family and sick leave](#), launching [public jobs programs](#), and [taxing the rich](#).

The pandemic has exposed, and deepened, longstanding inequalities in the United States. The path to a more egalitarian society will not come through more training and skills, but the collective power of working-class people. This school year, let's make sure we learn the right lesson.

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