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The Education Fix

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The idea that more degrees, credentials, and skills will raise the bottom of the economic floor has become an article of national faith. But educational systems can just as easily reproduce inequality as mitigate it.

[Cristina Viviana Groeger](#) • February 12, 2021



A secretarial school in Olyphant, Pennsylvania, c. 1945 (Lawrence Thornton/Getty Images)

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate the stark gap between the rich and poor in the United States, we have an opportunity to retire failed policy solutions to social inequality. One of these tired ideas, long an article of national faith across the political spectrum, is that education is the key to reducing socioeconomic inequality. Donald Trump saw a role for the federal government in expanding access to educational opportunities that would lead to “secure, high-paying jobs.” And, as

Joe Biden put it in his 2020 platform, education provides a “pathway to the middle class” by ensuring that everyone can “succeed in tomorrow’s economy.”

Education as the solution to inequality often places the burden of reform onto individuals with the least power, rather than directly challenging the unequal balance of power in the economy. But the problem goes even deeper: the American educational system has become a very effective tool for *reproducing* socioeconomic inequality, not minimizing it. Rather than continue to follow long-standing policy common sense, the new administration should break from this consensus and pursue more effective structural solutions for combatting unprecedented levels of inequality.

Today, perhaps the most common framework for understanding the relationship between education and jobs is the theory of human capital, which holds that one’s skills and knowledge determine how much money one makes. To reap the benefits of the modern “knowledge economy,” individuals must gain more human capital through education and training. If higher levels of education are available only to a small number of people, they will monopolize “high-skilled,” high-paying jobs. Expanding access to education, however, allows more individuals to enter these positions, reducing skill premiums and thus reducing inequality.

The United States has long had one of the highest rates of educational access in the world and continues to lead on measures of educational attainment. Despite this impressive record, the United States also has one of the highest rates of socioeconomic inequality and one of the lowest rates of social mobility across the Global North. High levels of education thus coexist with high levels of inequality. If education were in fact the best policy tool to reduce inequality, how could this be true?

The simple equation implied by the theory of human capital—more education equals less inequality—can’t account for the U.S. experience. It also misunderstands how the educational system has historically changed the economy around it. Indeed, we should be more attuned to how education contributes to the concentration of wealth and power today. Our national faith in education can become a trap if it succeeds in distracting us from what matters most in reducing inequality: the collective economic and political power of workers themselves.

Inequality in the First Gilded Age

The first Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century can help us understand the complicated legacy of educational expansion. In the booming industrial and commercial urban centers in the northern United States, the concentrated poverty

of European immigrants and African-American wage earners grew alongside the immense wealth of business and financial elites. In the decades between 1880 and 1930, social inequality grew to heights similar to our own times. At the same time, a massive, new educational infrastructure emerged in northern cities. In Boston, for example, annual taxes appropriated for schools tripled. In 1880, only 8 percent of fourteen-to-seventeen-year-old Bostonians attended public high schools; by 1940, over 50 percent did.

The ideology of education as a means of accessing lucrative employment was consolidated in this era, and for good reason. One of the key drivers of educational growth was a booming sector of office and sales jobs in the expanding bureaucracies of the corporate economy. A new cohort of students—especially women and second-generation Americans—used secondary schooling to access these positions. Fee-charging, for-profit “business” and “commercial” schools flourished in urban centers until free public high schools displaced them as the primary pathway into these jobs. The lived experience of these individuals lent credence to the faith in education as a means of social advancement.

But this success story obscures broader changes in the labor market. Employers used this new cohort of students to undercut the power of existing craft unions in the trades. Craft union power depended on workers’ monopolization of specific skills, which unions regulated by controlling the shopfloor and the apprenticeship process. Employers tried to create new forms of trade and industrial education to avoid union apprenticeship regulations, but unions fought these alternative training pathways, in many cases shutting them down or limiting their growth. Union opposition led employers to seek new strategies to reduce their reliance on craft workers altogether. Extensive division of labor and mass-production strategies, which reached a peak during the First World War, allowed firms to replace expensive craft workers with immigrant factory operatives, who might have basic literacy and numeracy learned in primary school, and a growing army of high school-educated clerical workers, supervised by a college-educated managerial elite. In other words, employers shifted their workforce from one based on workplace apprenticeships to one that relied on formal schooling.

This process effectively shifted the workforce toward those with less workplace power. While office and sales jobs represented social mobility to women and the children of immigrants, these positions had far less power and autonomy than those held by their male counterparts in craft unions. Unionization was almost nonexistent in white-collar jobs shaped by business culture and managerial aspirations. As these jobs rapidly feminized, their value to employers lay precisely in their contingent nature and low cost.

The entrance of high school-educated women into office and sales jobs sparked a backlash among a predominantly male, white, native-born elite. Upper-class men

forged new ties with colleges and universities to use degrees to control access to the top rungs of the managerial and professional ladder. In so doing, they legitimized their authority on the basis of academic “merit,” which in practice was premised on gender, racial, and ethnic prejudices.

The False Equation of Skill and Wages

Responses to Gilded Age urban inequality also provide evidence of the repeated failure of education to address the working conditions at the bottom of the economic ladder. A key idea animating Progressive reformers, many of them part of an emerging professional milieu, was that low-wage workers were paid little for their labor because they were “unskilled.” Training, therefore, could elevate their status and pay. In Boston, numerous philanthropies opened “schools of housekeeping” that aimed to train domestic workers to become skilled in their work, believing that this skill would transform the occupation into a well-paying, respectable job.

The notion that education can professionalize an occupation still shapes discourse around the power of education today. The problem is that occupational status did not, and does not, derive from education level; the perennial low status of the teaching profession is a case in point. Successful professionalization depends instead on the structural position of a particular occupation in the economy, and whether access to that occupation can be restricted. Business management became a profession in this period not because of the growth of collegiate and graduate degree programs, but because exclusive credentials from elite institutions became a tool to control access to the most lucrative corporate positions in the new economy.

In the early twentieth century, no amount of education could overcome the discrimination that kept recent immigrants and African Americans relegated to the lowest-paying service and manual labor jobs. And for those who entered white-collar employment, education offered little protection when periods of depression struck. This is just as true today; mass layoffs across industries during the pandemic should lay to rest the notion that higher education will shield someone from the vagaries of the market.

The history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century should prompt us to rethink the period between 1940 and 1970, when inequality declined. In the decades after the Second World War, many students used public higher education to access industrial and white-collar jobs, just as students used high school education as a ticket to white-collar employment at the turn of the twentieth century. However, expanding education was only a partial contributor to the decline in inequality. More important was a surge of worker power—not in the form of exclusive craft unions, but through the new, inclusive industrial unions led by the Congress of Industrial

Organizations. The power of workers in this period ensured that jobs had living wages and improved working conditions. It also provided the base of support for minimum-wage laws, federal social-welfare programs, and the progressive taxation necessary to pay for them.

Since the 1970s, the power of workers has eroded. As unionized, well-paying jobs have declined, the occupational structure has become increasingly polarized between a low-wage, immigrant-driven service sector on the one hand and professionals of the knowledge economy on the other. Elites, once again, are using credentials from exclusive universities to control access to the top of the economic hierarchy, especially in the fields of financial services, consulting, corporate law, and specialized medicine. More education for everyone else will not make more well-paying jobs appear. In a period when worker power is at an all-time low, higher educational enrollment may simply trigger more “opportunity hoarding” strategies for elites, and more cutthroat competition for a declining share of lucrative job opportunities at the top.

Lessons for Today

The early twentieth century offers several insights into the relationship between education and inequality. First, we cannot dismiss the grain of truth upon which the human capital framework rests: for over a century, schools have played an essential role in providing access to work. The expansion of free, public education a century ago displaced an emerging sector of for-profit schools providing training for white-collar jobs. At the same time, mass educational expansion is not a sufficient policy solution to the problem of inequality. Attempts to break the power of the elite by providing everyone with more education—even tuition- and debt-free education—are insufficient. Educational solutions to economic problems are often politically palatable precisely because they do not directly challenge elite economic power. For those concerned with social inequality, redirecting attention from a narrow focus on education to broader economic solutions is essential.

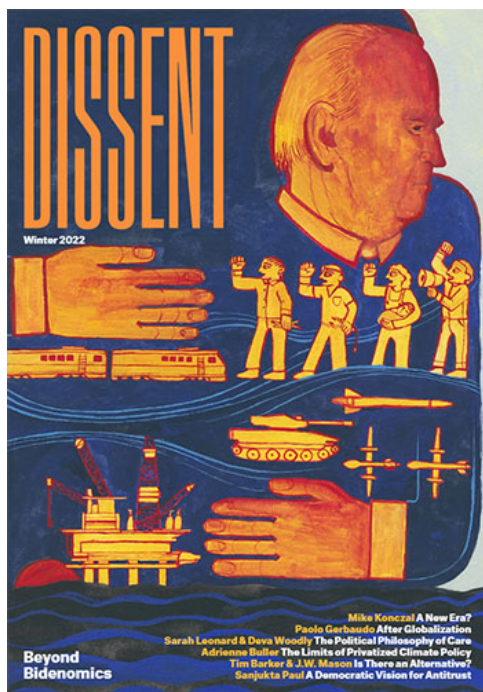
The history of the twentieth century shows how workers themselves can lead efforts to reduce social inequality. While only about 6 percent of private-sector employees belong to unions today, some of the largest service-sector occupations at present—those of healthcare workers, teachers, and domestic workers, whose members are disproportionately women and people of color—are spearheading new organizing efforts to rebuild workers’ collective power from below and confront the entrenched power of the economic elite.

Educators are witnessing the “educationalizing” of social problems firsthand, as unrealistic burdens are heaped onto schools even in the face of budget cuts. They have an important role to play in reframing inequality debates away from students’

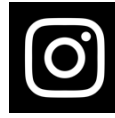
perceived lack of skills and toward the role of power in the economy and political system. Indeed, educators are already leading the fight not only for labor rights but also for the needs and safety of the disinvested communities in which they teach.

The economic disaster of COVID-19, a disaster disproportionately felt by working-class women and people of color, has revealed even more starkly the lack of social protections for workers. The Biden administration must make it easier for workers to organize unions, including historically excluded groups such as domestic workers and independent contractors. The administration should also live up to its promise to expand unemployment insurance, implement a \$15 federal minimum wage, create new public works programs, and increase taxes on the wealthy to fund essential social services and limit the ability of billionaires to undermine our democracy. Only by shifting the balance of power to workers can we hope to reverse the trend of rising inequality and build a more egalitarian society.

Cristina Viviana Groeger is an assistant professor at Lake Forest College and the author of *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston.*



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