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## Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley  
*University of Massachusetts Boston*, [padraig.omalley@umb.edu](mailto:padraig.omalley@umb.edu)

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## **Editor's Note**

***Padraig O'Malley***

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On December 3, 2013, when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, the ranking of the United States as number 27 on the global scoreboard elicited little surprise among teachers, educational professionals, academics, and educational policymakers. The usual platitudes were trotted out—no mention that the United States' standing was getting any worse, just which other countries were passing us by. We were stuck at a perennial average.

The results are in a sense a metaphor of the slow decline of the United State since the 1970s from a position of preeminence in the world in almost every field of societal endeavor. Once the country that others envied for its unrivaled vibrancy, for its pulsating energy cascading into seemingly limitless opportunities across its vast domain, its pioneering spirit opening new frontiers to explore, a land of innovation and entrepreneurship where any immigrant could raise himself by his bootstraps to unimaginable heights by hard work and unbridled ambition, it has slowly fallen off its pedestal and is settling for being average in many fields in which it once excelled.

At one time the country with the best educational system in the world, the United States now finds itself outranked by others, scrambling not to be the best again, just to be among the best. Decades of tinkering with reform has yielded few dividends. In 2012 one might have concluded from PISA scores that the country was moving backward. In 2000, it ranked eighteenth in mathematics and twenty-third in science out of thirty-two countries in the OECD's PISA scores, both well below the average of the participating countries (and in scores and rankings in reading during that time, it dropped to fourteenth among participating countries). Something had gone awry with No Child Left Behind.

Being average in a globalized economy means losing ground; average means that standards are insufficient to generate a labor force attuned to the uncertain needs of the future but also to the certain needs of the here and now. The usual culprits were identified, foremost among them income disparity, the now famous gap between the 1 percent and the rest of us—or we may even put the bar a little lower and say the top 10 percent and the huddling masses. And indeed, that yawning gap is more pervasive now than ever. In a 2010 piece, "Our Banana Republic," the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof reels off statistics that should shock: "The richest 1 percent of Americans now take home almost 24 percent of income, up from almost 9 percent in 1976. . . .C.E.O.'s of the largest American companies earned an average of 42 times as much as the average worker in 1980, but 531 times as much in 2001. Perhaps the most astounding statistic is this: From 1980 to 2005, more than four-fifths of the total increase in American incomes went to the richest 1 percent."<sup>1</sup> That is not all. More recent data offer even more compelling evidence of something gone terribly wrong in our supposedly egalitarian society, providing a foretaste of a social revolution in the making. The top 1 percent own 43 percent of the country's wealth, the next 4 percent another 29 percent, which means that 72 percent of the country's wealth fits in the domain of just 5 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup>

*Padraig O'Malley is the John Joseph Moakley Professor of Peace and Reconciliation, John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston.*

Recovery from the Great Recession of December 2007 to June 2009 exacerbated the differences. The incomes of the top 1 percent grew by 31 percent from 2009 to 2012, the bottom 99 percent by 1 percent; 95 percent of the income generated during the recovery years went to the now notorious 1 percent. These concentrations of wealth and income are increasing, revealing very definitely two societies moving in very different directions.

If one were to choose a single statistic that encapsulates the results of fifty years of economic expansion when GDP grew by 40 percent, it would be the median income of the working man (not woman), which has not budged an iota in real terms. The working man earns today what his father or grandfather earned half a century ago. Of course, household income increased as more women entered the labor market and the two-income family became the norm. And that increase was augmented by easy access to credit card borrowing, which gave people the illusion that they were better off than they actually were. (When the crash came in 2008—a surprise to the best economists in the country—household debt had reached \$13.9 trillion, compared with the \$7.77 trillion the Federal Reserve Bank had, by March 2009, committed to rescuing the financial system, including the new phenomenon on the block, “the too big to fail” banks that were the beneficiaries of hundreds of billions of taxpayers’ dollars to get them back on their feet.) Paying down consumer debt put a severe damper on consumer spending in the ensuing years; mortgage foreclosures resulted in tens of thousands losing their homes; and the unemployment rate remained stubbornly high at 8 percent, even with Obama’s economic stimulus and despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of job vacancies went unfilled. Those jobs went unfilled because the unemployed lacked the skills needed—a barometer of the mismatch between skills taught and skills required; of the prevalence of assembly-line education, where year in and year out jaded teachers trotted out the same curriculum that did not immerse pupils in problem solving, critical thinking, analytical critique, exploration and explanation of ideas, necessary components of an education that are the base line of education in the twenty-first century. Common Core is the first stab at rectifying this mismatch by setting national standards, and though it has come under criticism from some quarters, such is to be expected for something so radically different that involves a paradigm shift.

The new unemployed were educated individuals. Professionals in different fields for twenty-five or thirty years, with no proficiency other than in the field they had worked, nonadaptable and with a limited capacity to cope, having to adjust to a standard of living well below the one they had enjoyed for most of their careers. In a sense, a shot across the bow—there no longer are such things as “lifelong” careers, no givens, and education has to adjust to meet the needs of the unknown. A worrying trend, in this regard, is the fact that U.S. students have an aversion to pursuing college degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math, key areas where highly skilled workers are in short supply today, areas that will be the drivers of economic growth and prosperity for future generations.

But among the 90 percent of “the great unwashed” there is another, even more telling disparity: the median net worth of a white household is eighteen times greater than the median net worth of a black household.<sup>3</sup> This difference is greater than the difference between whites and blacks in South Africa at the height of apartheid, a shocking indictment of under-the-radar discrimination, a stain on the national character, but one that elicits no outcry, no interest, and no political impulse to fix it. In a world of “selfies,” outcry confines itself to narcissistic preoccupations.

This disparity cannot be attributed in full measure, however, to the education system that proceeds from childhood through high school in the economically deprived and socially ignored

areas pervasive throughout the country. Yes, something has gone wrong with our educational system and many things are in need of remedy. But can you expect the remedial “reforms” that are rolled out assembly line–like to succeed when the starting point is that 40 percent of children come from homes that subsist below the poverty level, when 20 percent of the country’s households receive food stamps just to fill hungry mouths? U.S. childhood poverty rates have grown by more than 60 percent since the 1970s and are now the highest among OECD countries; consequentially, in this country there are several education systems, descending or ascending according to levels of privilege. The ascendant—mostly white children—go through an educational experience that is radically different from that of those at the lower levels—mostly black, people of color. The mostly white levels do a lot better on PISA scores than their less fortunate peers.

In early September 2014, the OECD released yet another report on educational standards in the industrialized world. The United States trails almost all other industrialized nations when it comes to educational equality. Once the world leader in educating large numbers of its citizens, the United States now ranks near the bottom in the share of its working-age citizens who surpass the educational attainments of their parents. Just 30 percent of U.S adults have achieved a higher level of education than their parents—only four countries did worse. The statistic showing that among twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds, only 20 percent of men and 27 percent of women, both out of school, have achieved a higher level of education than their parents is troubling. But far more troubling is the fact that only one in twenty Americans aged twenty-five to thirty-four whose parents did not finish high school have a college degree. The average across twenty rich countries in the OECD analysis is almost one in four. So much for studies that show that the more income per household, the more education; the more education the more income—a self-perpetuated cycle of privilege.

At every level, the core problems of inequality—income, education, skills—are insufficiently addressed or not addressed at all. These problems resist amelioration in part because a passive population sinks into bore holes frequently exacerbated by their own actions—or inaction. If we follow the societal trend that higher taxes must be avoided at all costs, then we must pay the price: deteriorating infrastructure (some of our roads are third world; sixty-three thousand bridges are in need of repair), antiquated transportation systems (trains running on tracks built a hundred years ago—the mention of bullet trains more likely to be associated with the NRA rather than speed) and, of course, education.

On October 17, 2014, Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen, in a speech to the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, provided a grim picture of where the country is heading as she reeled off inequality statistics: “After adjusting for inflation, the average income of the top 5 percent of households grew by 38 percent from 1989 to 2013. . . . By comparison, the average real income of the other 95 percent of households grew less than 10 percent.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Yellen pointed out, “the gap in wealth between families with children at the bottom and the top of the distribution has grown steadily over the past 24 years, but has accelerated recently. . . . The median wealth for families with children in the lower half of the wealth distribution fell from \$13,000 in 2007 to \$8,000 in 2013, after adjusting for inflation, a loss of 40 percent.” Among families with children in the next 45 percent of households, median wealth fell “dramatically—by one-third in real terms—from \$344,000 in 2007 to \$229,000 in 2013.” But among families with children in the top 5 percent of households, median wealth fell “only 9 percent, from \$3.5 million in 2007 to \$3.2 million in 2013, after inflation.”

Public funding is one way “governments can help offset the advantages some households have in resources available for children,” Yellen said. “Research shows that children from lower-income households who get good-quality pre-Kindergarten education are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college as well as hold a job and have higher earnings, and they are less likely to be incarcerated or receive public assistance.” Access to good-quality early childhood education “has improved since the 1990s, but it remains limited—41 percent of children were enrolled in state or federally supported programs in 2013.” But since 2010 gains in enrollment, growth in funding have hit a brick wall because of budget cuts related to the Great Recession. “These cuts have reduced per-pupil spending in state-funded programs by 12 percent after inflation, and access to such programs, most of which are limited to lower-income families, varies considerably both from state to state and within states,” since local funding (i.e., property taxes) is invariably the key determinant of spending on education in every municipality in the country. As a result of overreliance on property taxes—half of U.S. public school funding comes from local property taxes, a much higher share than in other advanced countries—and the pervasiveness of poverty, “in 2010, the United States ranked 28th out of 38 advanced countries in the share of four-year-olds enrolled in public or private early childhood education. . . . The United States is one of the few advanced economies in which public education spending is often lower for students in lower-income households than for students in higher-income households.” In some countries, governments try to offset the funding disparities, and “others actually require higher funding in schools serving students from lower-income families, expressly for the purpose of reducing inequality in resources for children.” Once again, the United States finds itself outside the loop.

The myriad problems across every spectrum of our educational system, however, cannot be attributed solely to pervasive inequalities or the virtual abandonment of the increasing numbers who live below the poverty line—or the often the worse off—the near poor.

The entire educational structure needs to be dismantled at every level and reengineered. But this is fantasy, given fifty states with almost twenty thousand municipalities, widely varying property tax bases, each lord of its own educational domain. The adage that a child’s future is determined by zip code is a cliché only because it is a sad but indisputable fact. A child’s future is largely predetermined at time of birth. Poor children born into poor households will become poor adults, and if they marry, their children, in turn will perpetuate the cycle.

Leaving the structural problems aside, there is another variable that is frequently overlooked. (You cannot say “overlooked,” because educational research institutes, university departments, and a plethora of other institutions have created an industry that produces volumes of materials—books, journals, conferences, and congressional hearings generate a volume of literature that would tax the Library of Congress to catalogue and house. Every president invariably mentions how he will address education, and each leaves office more familiar with its limits and, at best, having made improvements in pre K–12 education.)

The variable I am referring to is culture, an attribute of American exceptionalism young people see as Americana birthright, a view unfortunately that far too many of their parents agree with: America is No. 1—in everything, has been, is, and will be ad infinitum, a preordained position that puts it a cut above other countries—in the case of defense spending indisputably true; in the case of virtually everything invariably false.

When the PISA results were released, several students from high-performing countries took part in a short panel discussion. They were asked what they attributed their country’s superior ranking to, and in every case the students talked about the value put on education in

their country as the gateway to a better life, to more opportunities, as something to be valued in itself because it inculcates norms of behavior that has left them with a well-entrenched sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Education is a serious business and their societies treat it with the seriousness it deserves. Pupils treat their teachers with respect because they receive respect in return. They value their teachers and their teachers in turn value them. In the United States, one can crisscross the country, exploring the pockmarks of poverty and neglect at every turn, and these words are alien. But they are alien, too, throughout the system. Teachers are not treated with due respect by their students, because society does not treat teachers with due respect. Society does not see them as professionals, endowed with the special skills required to educate their children with attributes of self-respect, respect for others, and a level of self-esteem that will withstand the setbacks they will encounter after they leave the safe zone their schools provide. Little wonder that over one-third of new teachers quit within five years. Societal dispositions drain the system of the best and brightest. In the United States, high school is too often something to be gotten through; hanging out takes precedence over homework. The norm is to count down the years to graduation and exit.

In October 2014, a judge in California ruled against state laws that entrenched teacher tenure. *Time* magazine features the decision in its cover story for November 3, 2014. The article, by Haley Sweetland Edwards and titled “Taking on Teacher Tenure,” opens with a two-page spread depicting four apples, one of them rotten.

“On a warm day in early June,” the article begins, “a Los Angeles County trial-court judge, Rolf M. Treu, . . . dropped a bombshell on the American public-school system. Ruling in *Vergara v. California*, Treu struck down five decades-old California laws governing teacher tenure and other job protections on the grounds that they violate the state’s constitution.”

Pointing out that the judge made two points in explaining his interpretation of the law, the article continues: “Tenure and other job protections make it harder to fire teachers and therefore effectively work to keep bad ones in the classroom. . . . Bad teachers ‘substantially undermine’ a child’s education. That, Treu wrote, not only ‘shocks the conscience’ but also violates the students’ right to a ‘basic equality of educational opportunity’ as enshrined in California’s constitution.”

The ruling and the reaction to it resulted in a firestorm of public controversy, lasting a couple of weeks, the average time public conversations retain public attention. While there is much in Treu’s ruling one can agree with, by suggesting that tenure is the sole obstacle to better K–12 education, the article misses the opportunity to put tenure in the larger context of the systemic problems standing in the way of our providing the high-quality education that is the right of every child.

With Republican majorities in the House and the Senate dedicated to the proposition that lowering taxes for those in the top income brackets and raising them among middle- and lower-income households will, through some strange alchemy, alleviate inequality, I see no indication that the issues I have gone to some lengths to harp on will be addressed during the next congressional cycle. Indeed, they will be execrated. Reforming public education top down and not in incremental bits and pieces requires a societal consensus; otherwise the legacy of this generation will be a generation less educated, less able to have the coping skills germane to a globalized economy, and the country’s ranking on PISA scores will drop from the average to the mediocre.

## II

Some time ago, the *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman interviewed Laszlo Bock, senior vice president in charge of recruitment at Google. Bock, Friedman notes, is on record as saying, “G.P.A.’s are worthless as criteria for hiring, and test scores are worthless. . . . We found that they don’t predict anything.” Bock had said that the “proportion of people without any college education at Google has increased over time”—“now,” Friedman adds, “as high as 14 percent on some teams.”<sup>5</sup>

“Good grades,” Bock told Friedman, “certainly don’t hurt.” Friedman adds, “Many jobs at Google require math, computing and coding skills, so if your good grades truly reflect skills in those areas that you can apply, it would be an advantage. But Google has its eyes on much more.”

“There are five hiring attributes we have across the company,” Bock explained. “If it’s a technical role, we assess your coding ability, and half the roles in the company are technical roles. For every job, though, the No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it’s not I.Q. It’s learning ability. It’s the ability to process on the fly. It’s the ability to pull together disparate bits of information. We assess that using structured behavioral interview that we validate to make sure they’re predictive.” The second thing was “leadership—in particular emergent leadership as opposed to traditional leadership. Traditional leadership is, were you president of the chess club? Were you vice president of sales? How quickly did you get there? We don’t care. What we care about is, when faced with a problem and you’re a member of a team, do you, at the appropriate time, step in and lead. And just as critically, do you step back and stop leading, do you let someone else? Because what’s critical to be an effective leader in this environment is you have to be willing to relinquish power.”

And then there are the attributes of humility and ownership. Friedman writes: “‘It’s feeling the sense of responsibility, the sense of ownership, to step in,’ Bock said, to try to solve any problem—and the humility to step back and embrace the better ideas of others. ‘Your end goal,’ explained Bock ‘is what can we do together to problem-solve. I’ve contributed my piece, and then I step back.’”

“And it is not just humility in creating space for others to contribute, says Bock, it’s ‘intellectual humility. Without humility, you are unable to learn.’ It is why research shows that many graduates from hotshot business schools plateau. ‘Successful bright people rarely experience failure, and so they don’t learn how to learn from that failure.’”

Where do these attributes fit into the PISA formula? How do teachers teach the ability to learn, perhaps the most crucial attribute in a market where the jobs of today are obsolete tomorrow? How do we teach the self-confidence and self-esteem to take being fired or laid off in stride, see it as opportunity not obstacle.

## III

The contributors to this issue— Andreas Schleicher, Catherine Boehme, Linda Darling-Hammond, Chris Edley, Michael Rebell, Fernando Reimers and Eleonora Villegas-Reimers, Kathleen J. Skinner and Paul Toner, Ronald Thorpe, Mark Warren, Randi Weingarten, and Jason Zimba—are among the most distinguished in their respective fields. They were asked to take the 2012 PISA scores as a starting point and address the obstacles to education reform that prevent this country from leapfrogging rather than scrambling its way into the top tier of education performers, to address what is perhaps the most significant variable: that, leaving aside the fact that every municipality in the United States has its own educational system, there is not one

education paradigm but several. There is a proliferation of education entrapments. Many argue persuasively, that the root of inequity in educational outcomes is growing poverty and resegregation. No Child Left Behind has become More Children Left Behind.

Within overarching and pervasive inequity, what is the state of education in the United States half way through the second decade of the twenty-first century? Why is it stuck in place on scores such as PISA? Are schools overstretched providing social services for children rather than teaching them? Does diversity have negative impact? Is Common Core compatible with the skills that will be required for the next fifty years so that human capital becomes the driver of economic growth? Are teachers sufficiently familiar with Common Core to have the skills they need to implement it successfully? Will we give teaching the status of a profession—a high-end income-earning profession or will we continue the mishmash policies that permeate, leaving teachers in some school districts earning less than forty thousand dollars year? What emphasis should be placed on “coping/adaptability” as a necessary skill—that is, when the whole idea of a career path is outmoded because such paths no longer exist and you can expect to have several careers in a lifetime, when one area of economy activity becomes obsolete and with it your job, has your education prepared you to adapt? Provided you with the tools for critical thinking? What are high-level PISA countries doing that the United States is not doing? Are there common trends among these countries, or are there attributes unique to a particular culture? Has a greater proportion of children in school in the United States come from single-parent families, and how does this statistic compare with that in high-scoring PISA countries? What support systems are provided to single parents? Are colleges graduating students with the technological skills that will dominate in the twenty-first century? Should schools be teaching more on the digital/virtual worlds we are going to live in? Are teachers equipped to teach in these areas? Is an emphasis put on them in other countries?

The ranking of the United States in PISA usually says nothing is changing, but a lot of things are changing and yet ranking seems stuck. Are structural issues the real impediments to change? How do we compare with the high-ranking PISA countries on these issues, such as how the school day is used? Are we forgetting the humanities as we put more and more emphasis on math, science, and biology—the subjects students must be grounded in to advance? In our rush to the top, have we lost sight of what education really is? Is our culture condemning us to a certain level of “averageness”? Does our form of governance from the federal to the municipal impose restraints that become obstacles to providing high-quality education? What kinds of governance systems do high-scoring PISA countries have, and how do we compare? Since technology is changing exponentially, how must teachers learn these new technologies and how they will affect our future? Are we educating our children to be good citizens with a sense of responsibility to their communities, their country, the world? These are among the many questions the authors’ address, providing a feast for dialogue and perhaps a blueprint for public education. Above all, it is imperative to emphasize that sustained commitment to reform must involve all stakeholders and must make the right of every child to a high-quality and equal education the civil rights issue of our day.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “Our Banana Republic,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Dunn, “Average America vs the One Percent,” *Forbes*, March 21, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” *New York Times*, August 30 2014



<sup>4</sup> Janet L. Yellen, “Perspectives on Inequality and Opportunity from the Survey of Consumer Finances” (speech presented at the Conference on Economic Opportunity and Inequality, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, October 17, 2014), <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/yellen20141017a.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “How to Get a Job at Google,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2014.