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TEACHER SYMPOSIUM

What Should High School Students Know?

We asked nine thoughtful educators from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives to write short responses to the question *"What should every student know about economic inequality by the time they graduate from high school?"*

STANDING WITH THE MOST VULNERABLE

Bill Bigelow

Economic inequality comes in many guises. One of the most egregious of these is the atmospheric colonialism enacted by the world's so-called developed countries, which, increasingly, will lead to unimaginable suffering from the Arctic to sub-Saharan Africa, from Bolivia to Bangladesh, from Louisiana to islands scattered throughout the Pacific. No student should leave high school without knowing how the effects of the climate crisis are borne with brutal unevenness throughout the world. They should learn that the people who have had the least to do with causing this crisis are the ones who will suffer the most. And students should be able to articulate the other side of that equation: The world's richest and most privileged are the most responsible for climate chaos and yet can best afford to insulate themselves from its worst effects.

In Portland, Oregon, where I taught high school social studies for almost 30 years, a collection of teachers, parents, students, and climate activists organized to persuade the school board to pass the most comprehensive climate justice resolution in the United States. Approved unanimously in May of 2016, the resolution lays out the school district's aspirations for Portland's students. Addressing the inequality of the climate crisis animates the school district's approach: "Portland Public Schools' oft-stated commitment to equity requires us to investigate the unequal effects of climate change and to consistently apply an equity lens as we shape our response to this crisis."

Perhaps the most significant piece of the school district's "climate justice" commitment is its call to nurture students as agents for equality: "All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice—especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change…" It's one thing for students to grasp the profound inequality of the climate crisis; but what's key is that students leave school with activist sensibilities—that they aspire to work in solidarity with "frontline" communities, those people hit first and hardest by the climate crisis.

The first professional development activity of the school district's Climate Justice Committee introduced teachers to the work of the Marshall Islands poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, whose performance poetry is a *cri de cœur*, demanding that those in the rich countries heed the voices of the first victims of the global climate calamity. The Marshall Islands, roughly half-way between Hawai'i and Australia, with 70,000 inhabitants, are comprised of about 1,000 islands, over 29 coral atolls, most less than six feet above sea level—and are all threatened by climate-induced rising seas. Jetnil-Kijiner performed "Tell Them" for teachers, which reads in part:

you tell them about the water
how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries
gushing over our sea walls
and crashing against our homes

tell them what it's like
to see the entire ocean level with the land
tell them
we are afraid …

but most importantly you tell them
that we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands.

Any curriculum that seeks to contribute to students' awareness of global inequality needs to alert them to how the climate crisis is crashing through people's lives around the world. But as importantly, it needs to encourage students to see themselves as capable of making a difference, of making the world more just and more equal—of standing with the most vulnerable.

LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND INEQUALITY

Katherine Cramer, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*

My dream is that every student, before graduating from high school or college, will understand that economic inequality breeds uncertainty and resentment, and that as a society we should focus our energy on the causes of inequality, not on our resentment towards each other. In particular, it would be helpful if students, at least momentarily, refrained from judging opposition to increased government spending on social welfare programs among low-income people as the act of people voting against their interests. Concluding that our fellow citizens and residents are ignorant of their own interests does not do much in the way of pointing toward progress. It is

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more productive for the task of reducing inequality if students could suspend judgment and listen enough to understand the perspectives that underlie support for small government and less redistribution.

For example, listening to the perspectives of people often labeled as voting against their interests might reveal that some of those people perceive that their community is struggling economically and believe it has been overlooked and disrespected by decision makers. Knowing this, it is easier to understand why some people might run from promises that their problems will be fixed if they would just let politicians increase their taxes a bit.

Encouraging students to hear those views might move us all toward solutions to economic inequality in several ways. First, our students might recognize that many people, across a variety of backgrounds, hold views similar to the one I have just described. That recognition might move us closer to agreement or at least collaboration rather than division. Second, listening to the perspective that "the system" is not working for "people like me," and the stories of the particular ways people believe this to be true might draw our students' attention to policy areas that are in need of reform, and perhaps even generate innovative ways of achieving those changes.

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THE ISSUE IS MOBILITY, NOT INCOME INEQUALITY

Patrick Garry, *University of South Dakota*

The general subject of economic inequality often breaks down into two competing concerns. One pertains to inequality of outcome or result; the other pertains to inequality of opportunity. While some people think government regulation should try to achieve greater outcome equality—for example, equality of income—others believe that equality of economic *opportunity* is the more relevant and workable guidepost. The concern with trying to regulate income equality is that it necessitates the heavy and intrusive hand of government into individual and social life. But even aside from this concern, the issue of income inequality is often distorted in our public-policy debates.

Income inequality is less a cause than a symptom of our economic problems. Widening income disparity results from diminishing upward mobility, which in turn results from various technological, cultural, and governmental policy factors.

The public rightly worries about wage stagnation and economic mobility, as well as the rising costs of education, health care, and raising a family. But these problems are not simply the result of income inequality. If anything, inequality is a reflection of these problems. So for politicians to focus only on government entitlements and higher taxes to combat inequality, is to ignore all the obstacles facing the upward mobility of working and middle class America.

The cause of income inequality is often used to justify a more active government agenda of redistribution, including higher taxes, increased spending on government entitlements, and more regulation of business. But government spending is at its highest level ever, and taxes on the wealthy are at their highest in generations, and yet income inequality is more pronounced than ever. The gap between rich and poor in 2015 was at its widest since records began, according to the Pew Research Center.

State-by-state analysis shows that states following policies of higher taxes and bigger government have bigger income gaps than do states following more growth-oriented policies (Pozdena and Fruits 2013; Laffer et al. 2014). So, at the minimum, redistributionist policies like raising tax rates or increasing regulation fail to achieve greater income equality. And at worst, such policies actually worsen inequality by dampening the economic opportunity and mobility needed by lower income individuals.

Work is the key to economic and social opportunity, which in turn fuels economic mobility, which in turn reduces income inequality. Work is the primary way that the working and middle class can advance their positions. And yet, in 2016, the proportion of Americans in the labor force dropped to near its 38-year low, and the number of nonworking adults hit a record high, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But instead of focusing on creating work opportunities, public policy often enhances dependency, which then denies the opportunity for upward mobility.

The best approach to income inequality seeks to lift up the bottom, rather than bring down the top. A policy agenda serving this focus includes increasing upward mobility through education that empowers workers and regulatory and tax reform that sparks job creation and wage growth. In today's world, the economic returns to job skills have greatly increased, as have the penalties to the unskilled. The challenge facing America is not income inequality, but the degree of opportunity for economic mobility.

No one wants a society deeply divided into the very rich and the very poor. But the question is how best to prevent that situation. Because America is a society dedicated to both individual liberty and a private sector economy, government policies focused solely on distributions of income levels across society are bound to fail and cause social conflict and stagnation. However, a focus on equality of opportunity and social mobility can strengthen both individual liberty and social vibrancy.

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TEACHING TO TRANSFORM: CLASSROOM STRUGGLE AGAINST INEQUALITY

Jesse Hagopian, *Garfield High School*

By the time students from poor and working-class backgrounds graduate from high school there are many things they will understand about economics—not so much because they have been educated about it in a classroom, but because they have experienced life from a particular class position.

The student who has to sit on a table because there are not enough chairs in the overcrowded classroom may not be able to articulate the finer points of surplus value extraction, but he is likely to be able to tell you there is a basic problem with who has money and who does not. The student whose family loses their home and has to move out of their neighborhood may not be able to recite details of an adjustable rate mortgage, but she knows something is wrong with the banking system. The student who is brutalized by police or who has a loved one locked away in prison may not be able to explain the role of the state in monopolizing the use of violence to protect private property, but he can probably tell you that racism and violence are a basic part of our system.

The job of educators, then, is to help facilitate a dialogue about the lived reality of students and provide the context to empower them to challenge the unequal power relations that cause the problems they experience. Poverty, low wages, unequal pay for women and people of color, long working hours, underfunded schools and overcrowded jails are not natural disasters—these are the results of real decisions made by powerful people. Young people need to understand that such decisions can be challenged through collective struggle. Students need to know that they do not have to accept being flushed down the school-to-prison-pipeline or graduating into a low wage economy. They should have the opportunity to learn about the powerful role youth have played in past movements for justice, and struggles today against mass incarceration, and the fight for a $15 minimum wage.

Most of all, students should see economics not as something that just happens or is done to them, but something that can be shaped, made more equal, even fundamentally transformed, through collective action.

THE WU-TANG CLAN WAS RIGHT

Gloria Ladson-Billings, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*

In 1993 the New York based hip-hop group Wu-Tang released its studio album, "Enter the Wu-Tang Clan (36 Chambers)" that contained the single C.R.E.A.M.—Cash Rules Everything Around Me. Like many artists in the hip-hop genre, Wu-Tang spoke to the clear understanding that most urban youth have about the importance of financial resources. Songs referencing money are ubiquitous in hip-hop. Songs such as Puff Daddy's, "It's all about the Benjamins," The Notorious B.I.G.'s "Mo money, mo problems," and 50 Cent's "I get money," are but a few of the songs that have been in frequent rotation on hip-hop stations and personal playlists over the years. In a capitalist society like the United States it is impossible to minimize the importance of financial resources—money, property, wealth, etc. What urban youth may understand is that financial resources are important for liberation. What they do not necessarily understand is how to legitimately access these resources and how the current structure is rigged against them.

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Over the last few decades, profound changes in our economic system have dramatically expanded inequality. In my own lifetime I have witnessed working class black people in the United States go from the possibility of home ownership, reliable employment, and the ability to meet basic needs to cycles of homelessness, food insecurity, lack of health care, and incarceration. My first teaching job in the late 1960s paid $7,600. My current students laugh when they hear that figure. However, when they see what the actual 2015 value of my salary is they are shocked. The 2015 equivalency of my $7,600 is $51,000! My salary placed me squarely in the middle class. However, more important is the fact that I was not earning 2-3 times more than the parents of the poor students I was teaching. Today, well paid professionals (doctors, lawyers, architects, etc.) and technology workers earn more than 10 times that of someone working full time at the federal minimum wage ($7.25).

The important thing for urban youth to understand regarding economic inequality is the difference between income and wealth. Wealth includes all assets (homes, bank accounts, stocks, bonds, etc.) minus liabilities (what one owes). Youth fascination with the glitz and glamour of celebrity—athletes, music artists, and actors who earn unusually high incomes—blinds them to the reality that "real money" exists in the category of wealth. It is here that economic inequality is most pronounced. The average wealth of white American households is $665,000. The average wealth of Latino households in the United States is $98,000 and the average wealth of black households in the United States is $85,000. These stark

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disparities spell out the immense canyon that exists between white and black citizens. According to Muhammad and Collins (2016) it would take the average black family 228 years to accrue the same amount of wealth that white families have today. This wealth disparity mimics every other disparity in social and civic life in this nation—health, employment, education, and other measures of well-being.

Finally, as difficult as these disparities are in the aggregate, the specific look at youth is more frightening. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the July 2016 youth unemployment rate is less than 10% for whites and more than 20% for blacks. When young people realize their opportunities are systematically limited by a structure that denies them access to basic life chances, it is no surprise that they reach for a brass ring like sports or entertainment to lift them out of their predicament. The Wu-Tang Clan tells the story—Cash Rules Everything Around Me!

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ADDRESSING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY THROUGH ECONOMIC LITERACY

Anand R. Marri, *Federal Reserve Bank of New York*

Irrespective of political beliefs and socio-economic status, most Americans want to achieve a society that has a more equal distribution of wealth than what we currently have in the United States (Norton and Ariely 2011). As high school students prepare to enter higher education institutions, the workplace, or both, they should understand that economic inequality stands out as one of the most challenging economic, political, and social problems we face as a society. They should also know that they can take steps to minimize economic inequality and its consequences. In doing so, they must understand three essential points about economic inequality.

First, economic inequality is growing in the United States. Over the last four decades, the top 10% have garnered a larger share of income and wealth, even as many segments of society continue to be excluded from the benefits of a growing economy. Spurring on changes to minimize economic inequality will only occur as more people, including youth and young adults, realize the level or extent of inequality that currently exists.

Second, economic inequality affects everyone in society no matter where one stands on the socio-economic continuum. Economic inequality has negative consequences as it undercuts a fundamental belief in the United States that anyone who works hard can move up economically regardless of one's background or demographics. Previous generations of students counted on opportunities for advancement in order to create a prosperous economy for all members of society. Youth today, however, face growing obstacles that lead them to question this narrative of social mobility.

As high school students prepare to enter higher education institutions, the workplace, or both, they should understand that economic inequality stands out as one of the most challenging economic, political, and social problems we face as a society. They should also know that they can take steps to minimize economic inequality and its consequences.

Third, economic inequality threatens to undermine economic growth and democracy. Many Americans, especially young people, may lose their economic, political, and social influence as economic inequality displaces them from gainful employment and as they face consequences of lowered economic, political, and social prospects.

Many Americans recognize that economic equality helps ensure that all citizens can contribute to a thriving democracy. Schools have a role to play in improving the economic, political, and social lives of all Americans. Students can help minimize economic inequality by becoming economically literate citizens. This means that they understand the forces that drive public policy at the macro level (fiscal and monetary policy) and that they gain the ability to make informed choices at the micro level (for example, personal finance) of everyday life (Marri 2014). Through this understanding, students can make better consumption, investment, and savings decisions in their own financial lives that may help incrementally reduce economic inequality. If students become economically literate citizens, then when they go the polls or engage in civic activities, they will better grasp how their choices connect to their own economic well-being and the well-being of the nation as a whole.[1]

NOTE

1. All views expressed are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York or the Federal Reserve System.

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AMERICA'S GROWING INEQUALITY

Pedro Noguera, *University of California, Los Angeles*

Inequality has become one of the most critical issues of our times. It has undermined the social fabric of society as more Americans come to understand that they are permanently stuck in a downward economic spiral and more Americans realize that their children's financial future is precarious. Inequality in wealth is correlated with other forms of inequality such as access to good healthcare, transportation, safe neighborhoods, and educational opportunity. For this reason, inequality poses as great a threat to our future as global warming.

However, like global warming, there tends to be considerable passive acceptance regarding the rise of inequality, even though its acceleration is a relatively recent occurrence. It is important to keep in mind that while inequality in power, wealth, status, and income may seem insurmountable, prior to *Brown v. Board of Ed* and the re-birth of the civil rights movement, so did racial segregation. Like the struggle against racial segregation, a struggle that has been waged over many decades (and that remains far from over), a social movement to counter inequality and its effects can and must emerge.

Young people today must recognize that given the enormity of the problem, the response to inequality must be multifaceted. They need concrete ideas for addressing inequality through policy, including access to affordable healthcare, housing, transportation, good paying jobs, decent schools, and safe neighborhoods. And young people need to understand how to present these ideas to politicians running for higher office so that they are forced to do more than offer grand promises and platitudes.

The point is that there is an alternative to passive acceptance. Young people need not accept such a profoundly unequal future but we must do more than merely fret over the direction we've been heading in. We've already seen mayors in cities like New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles get elected on the promise that they would do something to address the issue. The fact that these elected officials have so far been generally ineffective in countering inequality should not lead us to conclude that nothing can be done.

As a younger person, I was active in the anti-Apartheid movement. At the time, I had no idea that one day Apartheid would fall, that universities that once profited from their investments in South African companies would disinvest, or that Nelson Mandela would be freed after 27 years in prison. All of these things did in fact occur and the movement we were a part of played a small but significant role in bringing it about.

This is why I believe that a movement to counter inequality can have an impact. The question is: "Will a new generation of activists with the creativity and determination step forward to build it?" The answer to that question will likely determine what type of future we will inherit.

WEALTH: WHO OWNS HOW MUCH OF IT

Tamara Sober, *Virginia Commonwealth University*

As I think about what every student should know about economic inequality by the time they graduate from high school I reflect on my experience teaching 11th and 12th grade government and economics courses, where my students are often unable to differentiate between democracy and capitalism.

At the most basic level students need to know the difference between income and wealth, grasp that both income and wealth inequality are rising in the United States, and understand that this growing economic inequality is not an inevitable outcome.

They were not naïve when it came to understanding the power of money in politics. What they lacked was 1) exposure to *how* moneyed interests operate behind the scenes of a democracy, 2) content knowledge that demystifies economic policies, 3) real-world examples of how the power of organized people has and can continue to rival organized money, and 4) a forum to explore their own beliefs about these topics. The textbooks and curricula I was provided were silent on these topics. My goal was for students to recognize that economic policies—contrary to the neoclassical economic model's promotion of the *invisible hand of the market*—are made by people, and can be made to disproportionately benefit one group at the expense of another. This prompted me to create *Teaching Economics As If People Mattered* (Sober 2007) with lesson plans designed to uncover how economic policies can lead to economic inequality that can threaten our social mobility, efforts toward equality, and ultimately our democracy. The following observation is drawn from my integration of these lessons into my coursework.

At the most basic level students need to know the difference between income and wealth, grasp that both income and wealth inequality are rising in the United States, and understand that this growing economic inequality is not an inevitable outcome. I introduce these concepts by having students review historical trends in economic inequality. Students create human bar graphs depicting income growth, by quintile, during two different time periods when economic policies varied significantly. The visual affects pique students' interest in uncovering why all income groups improved their economic well-being during certain time periods, compared to more recent times when some groups, such as the top 20%, have experienced significant income growth while those in the bottom 20% have seen negative income growth (US Census Bureau). This sets the stage for students to research economic policies such as the GI Bill, government home ownership programs, and deregulation. Students then dive deeper into who benefits, who is potentially left out, or who is harmed by a given policy they choose to research.

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For example, examining government home ownership programs is a segue into a discussion of how institutional barriers such as Jim Crow laws, or more proximal factors such as the practice of *redlining* (Hodgson 2009; Reich et al. 2014; Sugrue 2014), placed significant barriers in the way of people of color, that have long-lasting consequences in contemporary America, made manifest in the racial wealth gap. A detailed look at economic policies and their consequences is an example of my above referenced "content knowledge that demystifies economic policies." It also provides a platform for hope when reviewing how organized people, for instance in the civil rights movement, came together to combat these barriers and rival organized money, a movement that must continue.

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EXPOSING STUDENTS TO ECONOMIC INEQUALITY THROUGH DATA

Mackenzie Wall, *Sycamore High School*

Economic inequality is a concept I never truly thought about until I experienced it in various places of the world after graduating high school. This leads me to ask myself, "What can I do to help my students leave this building with a foundational understanding of economic inequality so that they might be more prepared when confronted with it in their lives beyond school?" As a practicing public high school teacher, I have seen how important it is to expose students to data on economic inequality and encourage them to consider what it looks like in their community. This can lead to piqued curiosity in understanding economic inequalities in their nation and the world.

Several things come to mind as I consider the information necessary for students to properly understand economic inequality. Students need opportunities to connect the content they explore in school with the lives of people through compelling data. Humanizing the data can help students truly understand the gravity of economic inequality. It can also help them see the issue from a different vantage point.

Before graduating from high school, students should compare how economic inequality is experienced throughout the world. It is important for them to consider the advantages and disadvantages of having too much or too little economic inequality. Students should also evaluate the structural inequalities in our society that are tied directly to the economy. They need to be exposed to the raw reality of poverty, including generational poverty, which affects so many in our society. They should wrestle with what it means to have the freedom and opportunity to control their economic future. At the same time, they should explore specific reasons, obstacles, and challenges that prevent people from pursuing their economic freedom. Ultimately, economic inequality should be presented to students in a way in which they can freely draw their own conclusions about its inherent justice and/or injustice.

Although economic inequality is a complex topic that must be handled with great care in the classroom, students will benefit immensely from having more exposure to it before they graduate from high school. While learning about this, they will also gain insight on tangible ways to communicate with others about similarly controversial topics. An awareness of the omnipresence of economic inequality and its causes would provide students a baseline of knowledge as they move on to forge their own economic futures, which are sure to be impacted in one way or another by economic inequality. ■

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