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Policy Memo

I.   Question

Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the achievement gap and retention rates for low-income, Hispanic and Black students?

II.   Executive Summary

As a nationwide, foundational institution, the United States education system affects all children and thousands of young adults. Although our education system is intended to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, its current state is rooted in socioeconomic privilege and inequity which preserves an unchanged achievement gap that has persisted for the last 50 years (Hanushek et. al. 2019). The academic achievement gap refers to the discrepancies in academic performance and thus, success of certain groups of students – acquired from measures such as grades and standardized-test scores (Hanushek et. al. 2019). However, the achievement gap has remained unchanged because the measure is impacted by income inequalities which has remained severely inequivalent in the last half a century (Hanushek et. al. 2019). The widespread transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed and heightened the inadequacies of the U.S. education system through the greater barrier to resources available, such as technology and a school-friendly environment as well as the lack of necessary academic support from teachers. Thus, this transition and greater obstacles to learning has prevented upward social mobility and perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Therefore, students of lower socioeconomic status as well as immigrant and minority students must be provided greater educational support in the light of modified online learning.

III. <u>Background</u>

- Research has revealed that <u>the achievement gap between students of the highest and lowest socioeconomic positions</u> born between 1954 and 2001 <u>has</u> <u>remained unchanged</u>. One of the reasons for this persistence within the United States is <u>a lack of educational support to combat the obstacles many low-income, minority and immigrant students face</u> (Hanushek et. al. 2019).

- Students of a lower socioeconomic position or who are a product of immigration, unfortunately, <u>feel the pressures of poverty and higher crime rates within their communities</u> and <u>do not have access to the resources</u> necessary for academic success such as tutoring, technology, and online learning resources (Carhill-Poza et. al. 2020). For example, while only 7% of Caucasian students do not have access to internet connection, 19% of African Americans and 17% of Hispanics call this a reality (Darling-Hammond 2020). Furthermore, <u>the education system has not supported underprivileged students due to their lack of consideration of these students' lack of resources</u>. A study conducted over a 3-year period on immigrant students in an urban secondary school illustrates that although forms of technology, such as computers and tablets, seem universal, their implementation into education has remained unsuccessful due to the system's lack of awareness or acknowledgment of the disparities underprivileged, immigrant students face (Carhill-Poza et. al. 2020).

- <u>With the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic,, the lack of assistance to underprivileged students has been exacerbated, leading to many of these students falling further behind academically</u>. For example, models anticipate that the rate of "reading ability gain" among kindergarten students will decrease by 66% (Bao et. al. 2020). Also,

reading scores in kindergarten students will decrease by 31% as a result of online learning (Bao et. al. 2020). Therefore, kindergarten students who are read to on a daily basis an in their household can reduce the regression of their reading skills by 42% (Bao et. al 2020). However, as mentioned above, underprivileged students may not have a literate or available family member who can read to them every day nor the access to literature they can read.

IV. Key Stakeholders

<u>Government officials and Academic Administrators</u>

- Lawmakers and academic executives (i.e. elected officials, policy analysts, state and local legislatures, superintendents and principals) are obligated to develop policies on the federal, state and local levels as well as both district-wide and individual school initiatives. By acknowledging that all students come from diverse backgrounds and that some are more privileged compared to others, more effective laws and initiatives can be implemented to uplift students who possess a lack of resources. With such recognition of the failures of the current education system, government officials and academic administrators can directly create an education system based in equity and thus, prevent the continuation of the vicious cycle of poverty many underprivileged students find themselves stuck in.

<u>Students and their Parents</u>

- Research has supported that students and their parents are the primary stakeholders in the educational system. As evident in the US education system's unimproved achievement, the disparities underprivileged students experience have been silenced. Therefore, these groups can begin to benefit from the greater amount of published research and growing

conversations around these disparities that in turn, can bring their need to the forefront of education reform on the local, state and federal level.

- Furthermore, with a clear articulation of the educational reasons for the vicious cycle of poverty underprivileged student remain in, parents become more aware and thus, engaged in the struggles their children experience

Educators

- Educators are at the center of this issue because they have the most direct relationship with students and their parents. Along with the academic guidance teachers can provide with greater knowledge of the needs of underprivileged students, COVID-19 will also result in long-term emotional and mental effects that can be detrimental to academic performance. Therefore, with greater awareness of the needs of underprivileged students, educators can collaborate with them and their parents to devise a plan for educational success.

Educational Organizations

- Educational organizations, such as Higher Achievement, hold a major stake because they are the primary advocates of educational reform. An increased public awareness of the achievement gap can foster reform and the ability to alleviate the additional issues underprivileged students will experience due to the forced transition to online learning by COVID-19.

Employers

- Employers care and thus, work toward solutions to this issue in two realms. Primarily, with greater awareness of the education system's lack of resources and thus, the needs of underprivileged students, employers begin to recognize the intrinsic value of teachers

who are bilingual or have had the experiences of underprivileged students as one themselves. Secondly, with greater acknowledgement of the inequities of the education system, employers can appreciate the struggles and barriers such applicants have had to overcome when attempting to fill a position.

V.   Appraisal of Past Solutions

<u>Affirmative Action</u>

- Affirmative action refers to a series of policies to improve the representation of women and minorities in the realms of employment, education, et cetera. Affirmative action was introduced and enacted through the Employment Equality Act in 1998 to encourage greater equality.

- In the area of education, particularly college admissions or employment, affirmative action was implemented to resolve the issue of underrepresentation of certain identities. Therefore, with a lack of knowledge on the actual effect of this attempted reform, many incorrectly argue that affirmative action has made it easier for minority groups to be admitted into university, solely based on their identity rather than merit. However, this argument is null because in general, affirmative action has led to massive generalization that have placed students in higher education systems where they can neither engage in inquiry adequately or compete effectively (Taylor et al., 2012). For instance, while Black college first year students are more likely to enter university with the aspiration of a career in science of engineering than white students, such large preferences provoked black students to desert these studies at twice the rate of whites (Taylor et al., 2012).

<u>No Child Left Behind Law</u>

- Former President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy was passed by Congress in 2001 as a step toward educational reform for students in grades 3 through 8 who became required to take standardized testing (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The intention behind the initiative was to close the achievement gap by focusing on the factors (i.e. racial and ethnic disparities, poverty, and lack of English proficiency) that perpetuate the achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

- Unfortunately, the NCLB did not recognize the mounting inequality of underprivileged students that is emphasized in my research and incorrectly assumed that testing was a form of reform (Darling-Hammond, 2007). As a result, the initiative left the least-proficient schools untouched and rewarded the already efficient ones (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

VI. Project Plan

With extensive research on the lack of resources, support and improvements to the education system for underprivileged students and how their struggles will worsen in the wake of COVID-19, I intended for my social action project to aid students directly. Therefore, because there are several organizations in the DMV area that have an extensive past aiding underprivileged students, it was important that I collaborated with the DMV-based, non-profit organization, Higher Achievement, for my social action project. With this partnering organization, I organized a joint social media fundraising campaign and charity run. When planning, the charity run seemed practical in the wake of COVID-19 while directly aiding students as the donations raised during the event would be given to the partnering organization alongside funds raised during the associated social media campaign. Additionally, the social media campaign was intended to raise awareness around the barriers underprivileged students

face and the consequent need for reform of the education system. Overall, the social media campaign and associated fundraising efforts were successful as I gained over 100 followers and raised about 200 dollars. However, due to the end of the semester for most and the financial burden due to COVID-19, the charity run did not achieve the engagement necessary to complete this portion of the action project.

VII. Conclusion

Evidently, modified learning has both uprooted and exacerbated the disparities within the U.S. education system that have prevented the achievement gap from closing or the retention rate from diminishing. Rather, based on research derived from peer-reviewed, scholarly sources, the U.S. education system must become aware of the education system's failures, communicate with struggling or disadvantaged students and their guardian, and offer learning aids in response to this contact. Therefore, although there have been previous attempts of education reform that surround my initial argument, it is primitive to support Higher Achievement, a non-profit, educational organization that uplift underprivileged students, because their mission and role already encompasses the necessary adjustments the U.S. education system should take as mentioned above toward reform.

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