

Reference: Boyd-Zaharias, Jayne & Pate-Bain, Helen. (2008, September). Class matters – in and out of school. Phi Delta Kappan, 90 (1), pp. 40-44.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Background: Students from low-income or minority backgrounds in the United States continue to fare poorly in schools, with persistently high dropout rates and chronically low achievement scores.

Purpose: To reframe discussions about school improvement so that the impact of broader social inequities are more fully considered when deliberating issues pertaining to student learning.

Research Design: Analytic essay.

Conclusions: The United States has failed to deliver on its promise to provide a high-quality education to every child, for reasons that extend well beyond school walls. Children learn best when they live in safe, stable neighborhoods, yet nearly one-third of the nation's poorest children have attended three different schools by 3rd grade; affordable housing in stable neighborhoods remains a fundamental social need for improving student achievement. Another basic social factor is poverty: over 17% of American children -13 million girls and boys - live in poverty. Furthermore, 33% of black workers and 39% of Hispanic workers earn poverty-level hourly wages. Alleviating poverty represents a second foundational social need for improving student achievement. The positive effects of early childhood education have been conclusively established in the research literature, yet many poor or minority children do not have a quality preschool option available to them.

Project STAR, the Tennessee randomized-controlled field trial on reducing class size in the early grades, has demonstrably shown the academic, economic, social and even health benefits of small class sizes. Class-size interventions in the early grades would confer substantial public benefits while improving the achievement of low-income and minority students. All students, and especially poor and minority students, would benefit from a renewed focus on instructional strategies and techniques in the classroom: traditional methods such as lecturing from the front of the classroom are inadequate to supporting and stimulating learning amidst diverse groups of students.

Finally, policymakers in Washington DC must confront three inconvenient truths if the United States ever hopes to offer a high-quality education to every child: 1) social class inequities in this country are vast and growing; 2) schools cannot close the achievement gap or solve the dropout problem on their own; and 3) it will require an enormous investment of public resources to address the social and economic factors affecting the lives – and the learning – of low-income and minority children, but the cost of inaction will ultimately be even greater.