

New report finds low family income not a major reason for poor student achievement

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Family income is associated with student achievement, but careful studies show little causal connection. School factors – teacher quality, school accountability, school choice – have bigger causal impacts than family income per se, according to a new analysis by Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG).

The analysis, prepared by PEPG director Paul E. Peterson, calls into question the Broader, Bolder Approach (BBA) to educational reform that has been advanced by a group of education scholars, teacher union leaders, and non-profit groups. The BBA recommends that proposals to enhance teacher quality, school accountability and student choice be dropped in favor of policies that would redistribute income and provide support services to families outside the regular school day.

Peterson focuses on a paper presented by Duke University Professor Helen F. Ladd, a BBA co-chair, which was given as the presidential address before the Association of Public Policy and Management in Washington, D.C. in November of 2011, and is widely regarded as the key scholarly work underpinning BBA. Peterson’s article, “Neither Broad Nor Bold: A narrow-minded approach to school reform,” is available at www.educationnext.org and will appear in the Summer, 2012 issue of Education Next.

BBA’s mission statement holds: “Weakening that link [between income and achievement] is the fundamental challenge facing America’s education policy makers.” Peterson agrees that the connection between

income and student performance “is no less true in the Age of Obama than it was in the Age of Pericles.” But, he points out, most of the connection is not causal, but due to other factors. He cites a study by Julia Isaacs and Katherine Magnuson (Brookings Institution, 2011), that examines an array of family characteristics – such as race, mother’s and father’s education, single parent or two-parent family, smoking during pregnancy – on school readiness and achievement. The Brookings study finds that the distinctive impact of family income is just 6.4 percent of a standard deviation, generally regarded as a small effect. In addition, Peterson calls attention to earlier research by Susan Mayer, former dean of the Harris School at the University of Chicago, which also found that the direct relationship between [family income](#) and education success for children varied between negligible and small.

Responding to Ladd’s claim that the gap in reading achievement between students from families in the lowest and highest income deciles is larger for those born in 2001 than for those born in earlier decades, Peterson points out that the achievement gap between income groups was growing at exactly the same time the federal government was rapidly expanding services to the poor – Medicaid, food stamps, Head Start, housing subsidies, and many other programs.

“A better case can be made that any increase in the achievement gap between high- and low-income groups is more the result of changing family structure than of inadequate medical services or preschool education,” Peterson says. In 1969, 85 percent of children under the age of 18 were living with two married parents; by 2010, that percentage had declined to 65 percent. The median income level of a single-parent family is just over \$27,000 (using 1992 dollars), compared to more than \$61,000 for a two-parent family; and the risk of dropping out of high school increases from 11 percent to 28 percent if a white student comes from a single-parent family instead of a two-parent family. For blacks, the increment is from 17 percent to 30 percent, and for Hispanics, the

risk rises from 25 percent to 49 percent.

Peterson notes that most of the proposals to lift [student achievement](#) that Ladd and her BBA colleagues offer, such as expanded social services, preschool, and summer programs, ignore the many hours children spend at school and amount to a “potpourri of non-educational services (that) have never been shown to have more than modest effects on student achievement.” He points out that many school reforms – merit pay, school vouchers, and student and school accountability – have been shown to have had equivalent or larger impacts. For example, [school accountability](#) initiatives have raised student performance by 8 percent of a standard deviation. Initiatives to improve teacher quality have the potential of raising [student](#) performance by 10 to 20 percent of a standard deviation.

Provided by Harvard Kennedy School

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