



THE OPINION PAGES | LETTER

Invitation to a Dialogue: Unequal Schooling

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To the Editor:

A prevailing belief in the United States is that education is the great opportunity equalizer — a silver bullet that can lift kids out of poverty and transform them into productive citizens. Yet the reality of our “make or break” education system is that race and social class largely determine the quality of one’s educational life, from pre-K to graduate school.

“Global cities” like New York, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles boast diverse populations and cultural depth, but their public school systems remain highly segregated. Much of this has to do with housing and rapid rates of gentrification. But it also has to do with the slow repeal of public policy focused on school integration in favor of privatization, accountability schemes and school choice. A recent University of California, Los Angeles study, for example, argues that in New York City, private and charter schools are exacerbating the problem of “apartheid” schooling.

“School choice” does not really involve choice for many American children. It’s a privilege that enables some parents to opt their children out of public schools. These trends pose a no-win ethical dilemma for parents, especially those in big cities: Do we personally invest in our public schools by sending our kids to them, even if that means walking through metal detectors to get to class, coping with high teacher turnover, and having only limited access to academic and extracurricular resources? Or should

we provide the best opportunities our privilege can buy, at the expense of things like diversity and social justice that we all claim to value?

It's clear that small class sizes and specialized treatment are good for kids. But they're good for all kids, not just those who pass entrance tests or win school lotteries or have money. Education is a microcosm of a host of problems linked to social inequality. In the United States, "public" has come to signify the bottom of the barrel. But it should denote our concerted best, what we can achieve when we put our minds — and our wallets — together.

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New York, April 21, 2014

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Editors' Note: *We invite readers to respond briefly by Thursday for the Sunday Dialogue. We plan to publish responses and a rejoinder in the Sunday Review. Email: letters@nytimes.com*

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