



THEMES in the NEWS

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On Equal Terms

by UCLA IDEA

Fifty-seven years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate education was not equal. Further, the court said education was “perhaps the most important function of state and local governments” and “where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”

Since 1954, the country continues to dispute a key element of that decision: *on equal terms*. In the 1950s, the country was immersed in segregation and Jim Crow racism and hadn't yet seen the Civil Rights Movement or the 1964 civil rights law. The court's declaration of “equal terms” energized many people to give real (not just rhetorical) meaning to equal education. Few expected to achieve equal terms overnight or with the stroke of a pen. They did not expect that half a century later, education systems would still be, to so large a degree, separate and unequal.

One of the lessons the country has learned—or should have learned—since *Brown* is that the unequal terms of education are not exclusively a school problem but a social problem as well. A recent report reveals California's extreme gap between prosperity and poverty. For example, there is a \$58,000 yearly difference in median income between Silicon Valley and East Los Angeles. Nearly all California public schools receive inadequate funding, but families with higher income and education attainment can make up for resources and opportunities that schools don't provide. Thus, the terms of education are not equal between poor and wealthy students, and in times of economic crisis and high unemployment those terms become even more unequal.

Gov. Brown's revised May budget, unveiled Monday, included extra funds that would temper cuts to education, but promised very little to help those in extreme poverty. He proposes directing \$3 billion of the \$6.6 billion in additional state revenues to K-12 schools, but schools will only receive these funds if the governor's proposal is approved by a two-thirds vote of the Legislature. And even if this does occur, the gains to schools can be neutralized by unrestored social services and support systems.

Statewide and across the nation economic crises and unemployment have deepened education inequalities, drawing starker contrasts between wealthy schools and neighborhoods and economically devastated communities whose schools are overcrowded, have inexperienced teachers and narrow curricula, dilapidated facilities with metal detectors, and students, teachers, and administrators under high stress.

Important steps can be taken to equalize the terms of education if that were a public and political priority. We know that just a small portion of the state's wealth could go a long way toward equalizing opportunity for half of the state's high school dropouts who are concentrated in just 100 of the state's 2,500 high schools. Enormous political pressures work against directing more resources to those schools and to communities with the greatest needs, so counter-pressures must continue to assert students' right to education on equal terms.