

Neither Broad Nor Bold

A narrow-minded approach to school reform

Helen Ladd, Presidential Address to the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management in Washington, D.C., November 4, 2011.

Checked by Paul E. Peterson

Children raised in families with higher incomes score higher on math and reading tests. That is no less true in the Age of Obama than it was in the Age of Pericles or, for that matter, in the Age of Mao. But is parental income the *cause* of a child's success? Or is the connection between income and achievement largely a symptom of something else: genetic heritage, parental skill, or a supportive educational setting?

The Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, a coalition of education professors and interest-group leaders, including the heads of the country's two largest teachers unions, have concluded that family income itself determines whether or not a child learns. In the first paragraph of its mission statement, the coalition claims that it has identified "a powerful association between social and economic disadvantage and low student achievement."

"Weakening that link," the Broader, Bolder group goes on to say, "is the fundamental challenge facing America's education policy makers." For this group, poverty and income inequality, not inadequate schools, are the fundamental problem in American education that needs to be fixed. Other possible approaches to improving student achievement—school accountability, school choice, reform of the teaching

profession—are misguided, counterproductive, and even dangerous. The energy now being wasted on attempts to enhance the country's education system should be redirected toward a campaign to either redistribute income or expand the network of social services.

The Broader, Bolder platform has won the wholehearted support of the country's teachers unions. But it's much to the credit of the current U.S. secretary of education, Arne Duncan, that he has carefully kept his distance, insisting instead on accountability, choice, and teacher policy reforms that the Broader, Bolder group finds dispensable.

Inasmuch as the Broader, Bolder movement can be expected to gather steam in an election year, especially given the success of Occupy Wall Street and the "1 percent" campaign, it is worth giving attention to the scholarly foundation on which its claims rest. That is best done by looking closely at the presidential address given before the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management by one of the coalition's cochairs, Helen Ladd, a Duke University professor, which she summarized in a December 2011 op-ed piece published in the *New York Times*.

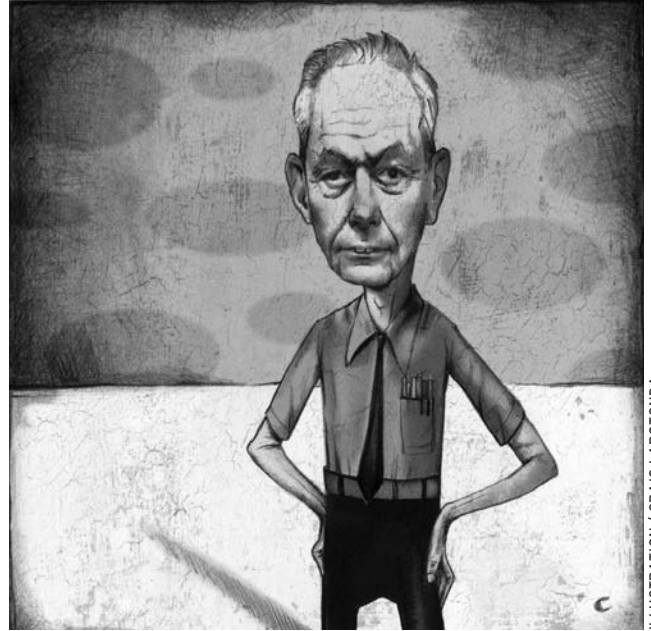


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The Platform

The central thesis of the Ladd presidential address is certainly sweeping and bold: The income of a child's family determines his or her educational achievement. Those who come from low-income families learn little because they are poor. Those who come from prosperous families learn a lot because they are rich. Her solution to the nation's education woes is almost biblical. According to St. Matthew, Jesus advised the rich man to "Sell what you possess and give to the poor." Not quite as willing as St. Matthew to rely on the charitable instinct, Ladd modifies the biblical injunction by asking for government intervention to make sure the good deed happens. But she is no less confident than Matthew that wonderful things will happen when the transfer of wealth takes place. Once income redistribution occurs, student achievement will reach a new, higher, and more egalitarian level. Meanwhile, any attempt to fix the schools that ignores this imperative is as doomed to failure as the camel that struggles to pass through the eye of a needle.

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Of course, Ladd does not put it quite that bluntly. But her meaning is clear enough from what she does say: education reform policies “are not likely to contribute much in the future—to raising overall student achievement or to reducing [gaps in] achievement.”

The “logical policy response,” she continues, “would be to pursue policies to reduce the incidence of poverty.... That might be done, for example, through macro-economic policies designed to reduce unemployment, cash assistance programs for poor families, tax credits for low wage workers, or an all-out assault ‘war on poverty.’”

Ladd is particularly enthusiastic about her approach “given the current high unemployment rates and also the dramatic increase in income inequality in this country since the 1970s.”

She continues, “Many considerations...make a compelling case for the country to take strong steps to reduce income inequality.”

Though income redistribution is the preferred option, Ladd decides it is not politically feasible. “Such a policy thrust is not in the cards, at least in the near term...unless the current protests in New York City and elsewhere...[put] income inequality back on the policy agenda.” In the meantime, the best course of action is for the government to fund a host of new services for the poor.

Why do the better-off have higher-performing children?

Key to Ladd’s case is a graph that shows a correlation between family income and student achievement in 14 industrialized nations. To no one’s surprise, that graph shows that in every country students who come from higher-income families score higher on math and reading tests. But is the connection causal? Do some students do better than others because their parents earn more money? Or are the parents who make a better living also the ones who do a better job of raising their children?

In work published in 1997, Susan Mayer, former dean of the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy Studies, tried to answer this question by carrying out a variety of tests, each of them an attempt to see exactly how much changes in income directly affect student achievement. In one test, she looked at those on welfare who lived in states where welfare benefits were higher. She found little if any benefit for those children living in one-parent families. Overall, she found that the direct relationship between income and education outcomes varies between negligible and small.

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In a 2011 Brookings Institution report, Julia Isaacs and Katherine Magnuson explored this topic by looking specifically at the impact of family income on child readiness for school, a primary concern of the Broader, Bolder coalition. The authors rely on recently collected data from a U.S. Department of Education survey of a representative sample of U.S. families that tracked children from birth to the year they entered school. They look at the impact of a host of family characteristics on school readiness and

student achievement in the first year of school. When they calculate the simple correlation between income and math achievement, Helen Ladd’s approach, they find that a \$4,000 increment (a 50 percent increase in the \$8,000 average income reported by the families in this study) in the income of the poor family will lift student achievement by 20 percent of a standard deviation (close to a year’s worth of learning in the middle years of schooling), a substantial impact that seems to support the Broader, Bolder claims. But when the authors adjust for other factors—race, mother’s and father’s education, single or two-parent family, smoking during pregnancy, and so forth—the distinctive impact of family income on math achievement drops to just 6.4 percent of a standard deviation. It is better than twice as important for achievement that children living in a low-income family have a mother with a high school diploma (as compared to one without the diploma) than that the family has 50 percent more income.

Is it absolute income or relative income that counts?

Ladd claims that Finland, Canada, and the Netherlands have higher student performance because they have fewer children living in poverty. To arrive at this conclusion, she excludes the value of medical programs and other government services, the very items that later become part of her policy agenda. This is no small matter, as the U.S. poverty rate in 2003 was just 8.1 percent if those items are included, 23 percent less than the officially reported 10.5 percent poverty rate for that year (which fails to take into account food stamps, Medicaid, school lunch programs, earned income credits, and other cash transfers). In addition, Ladd defines poverty in relative, not absolute, terms. Anyone is poor if he has an income more than 1 standard deviation below

the average. With that definition, she decides that only 4 percent of the children in Finland live in poverty compared to 20 percent of the children in the United States, despite the fact that average income in the U.S. is a third higher than it is in Finland.

Of course, one could also conclude that Finland's rising test-score performance is due to the growing income gap in that country. In 2008, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that "the gap between rich and poor has widened more in Finland than in any other wealthy industrialized country over the past decade." When one picks out stray facts from a country one likes, anything goes.

Using the sociologist's relative definition of poverty, and not the absolute definition used by ordinary people, fits the Broader, Bolder agenda. The point is not to provide opportunities for the poor but to equalize wealth across society as a whole. Never mind if everyone, rich or poor, ends up with less.

Do changes between 1940 and 2000 explain the larger achievement gap?

Drawing on a study by Stanford education professor Sean Reardon, Ladd says 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 the early 1940s. She suspects it is because those living in poor families today have "poor health, limited access to home environments with rich language and experiences, low birth weight, limited access to high-quality pre-school opportunities, less participation in many activities in the summer and after school that middle class families take for granted, and more movement in and out of schools because of the way that the housing market operates."

But her trend data hardly support that conclusion. Those born to poor

families in 2000 had much better access to medical and preschool facilities than those born in 1940. Medicaid, food stamps, Head Start, summer programs, housing subsidies, and the other components of Johnson's War on Poverty did not become available until 1965. Why didn't those broad, bold strokes reduce the achievement gap?

What has changed for the worse during the intervening period is not access to food and medical services for the poor but the increment in the percentage of children living in single-parent households. In 1969, 85 percent

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of children under the age of 18 were living with two married parents; by 2010, that percentage had declined to 65 percent. According to sociologist Sara McLanahan, income levels in single-parent households are one-half those in two-parent households. The median income level of a single-parent family is just over \$27,000 (in 1992 dollars), compared to more than \$61,000 for a two-parent family. Meanwhile, the risk of dropping out of high school doubles. The risk increases from 11 percent to 28 percent if a white student comes from a single-parent 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. In other words, a parent who has to both earn money and raise a child has to perform at a heroic level to succeed.

A better case can be made that the growing achievement gap is more the result of changing family structure than of inadequate medical services or preschool education. If the Broader, Bolder group really wanted to address the social problems that complicate the education of children, they would explore ways in which public policy could help sustain two-parent families, a subject well explored in a recent book by Mitch Pearlstein, *Shortchanging Student Achievement* (see "Moynihan Redux," *book reviews*, p. 74), but one that goes virtually unmentioned in the Ladd report.

Why do states differ?

Ladd tells us that states that have a high poverty rate—for example, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, and Louisiana—have lower math and reading scores than states with low poverty rates, such as New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Utah, and Maryland. While Ladd comes close to saying that high state poverty rates produce low achievement, the opposite connection is more plausible. The New England states and Utah have the lowest child-poverty rates because the commitment to education in those states has deep historical and cultural roots, and the families in those states are more likely to remain intact. Meanwhile, the southern parts of the United States all but closed the school doors to African Americans and only opened them a small crack for all but well-to-do white students throughout most of the 19th century, and even well into the 20th. It's easier to make the case that the wide range in educational opportunity and achievement among the states in the

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not-too-distant past is the cause—not the consequence—of the variation in state poverty rates today.

Even in contemporary America, the places that have strong education systems tend to attract business, industry, and a skilled workforce. Where high-quality schools are abundant, incomes are generally high and poverty low. If a state is well endowed with human capital, its citizens are prosperous and its students will be learning at school. Does anyone believe that the federal government could reverse Connecticut's and Alabama's places on the student achievement scale if it took the money from the Constitution State and gave it to the Heart of Dixie?

Of course, we are not making the claim that the quality of a state's schools is the only thing that affects poverty levels. Economic life is too complex to be reduced to any single factor. No matter what the Broader, Bolder group says, any inference that might be drawn from a simple correlation between achievement and poverty is problematic.

Perhaps recognizing the weaknesses in her case, Ladd tries to bolster it by correlating changes in achievement with changes in the child poverty rate within states. She finds that in recent years a 1 percentage point increase in the poverty rate reduces achievement by about .03 standard deviations. But she does little to control for other factors that may be changing at the same time. If single-parent households in a state are increasing, they could be adversely affecting student achievement and child poverty rates simultaneously. And if the state economy is sliding, talented, eager workers might be moving elsewhere and leaving behind the less ambitious, who are likely to be those with low-achieving children. In other words, any simultaneous shift in poverty rates and achievement is likely to be the result of a third factor that affects both simultaneously. Even the most devoted Broader, Bolder fan can hardly claim

that a child's test scores bounce up and down with the number of bills in Daddy's pocket.

Why do people deny the poverty reality and claim that schools can teach poor students?

Ladd is so confident of her data that she attacks as deniers those who question a strong correlation between income and achievement. "Can anyone credibly believe that the mediocre overall performance of American students on international tests is unrelated to the

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fact that one-fifth of American children live in poverty?" she asks in her *New York Times* essay. Well, yes, they can. Even if we compare with *all* students in other countries the math performance of only those U.S. students from families where one parent has a college degree, the U.S. ranks 19th among the nations of the world who took the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test; just 10 percent of students from college-educated families performed at the advanced level. More than 20 percent of *all* Koreans and Finns do that well, as do 15 percent of *all* Canadians. Surely, those telling

facts about the state of American math education cannot be attributed simply to child poverty.

Attacking the Reforms

But if poverty is the Broader, Bolder whip, the horses to be flogged are those pulling the school reform chariot: not to get them to run faster but to punish them for their efforts. School reformers, she says, have been recklessly trying to improve education "by better use of information and incentives."

She objects to the "no excuses" approach to education, which expects strong performance from students regardless of family background, saying that the few schools that are able to accomplish the task are unusual places filled with kids from families with especially devoted parents. She criticizes George W. Bush for worrying about the "soft bigotry of low expectations." That kind of talk goes "a long way toward explaining why No Child Left Behind has not worked," she says, overlooking the fact that gains in math and reading since its passage have amounted to 8 percent of a standard deviation, with even larger gains among minority students (see "Grinding the Antitesting Ax," *check the facts*, Spring 2012).

Ladd condemns the use of test-score information for the purpose of evaluating and compensating teachers. "Extensive research shows that...valid and reliable measures of teacher effectiveness," have yet to be generated, she says, blithely putting on ignore important work by Thomas Kane, Eric Hanushek, and Raj Chetty and his colleagues (see "Great Teaching," *research*, page 62), which shows that students learn in any given year somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of a standard deviation more if they have an especially effective teacher rather than a very ineffective one.

Ignoring the potential impact that would accompany the recruitment and retention of more-effective teachers, Ladd condemns merit-pay policies

based on student test performance on the grounds that such policies “provide... incentives for [school officials] to narrow the curriculum to the tested subjects of math and reading, and to direct teacher attention to basic skills away from student reasoning skills.” Even worse, it leads to “unfair and arbitrary treatment of teachers.” Once schools “place heavy weight on student test scores” they are “likely to do more harm than good.” One can hear the applause ringing out in union halls across the country.

Charter schools are rejected because that they constitute merely a “governance change” that “ignores the educational challenges facing disadvantaged children.” She worries that such schools are “draining funds from the traditional public schools,” even though there is not a single state that takes money away from public schools unless a child leaves them for a school the parent prefers. Ladd apparently thinks public schools should receive money whether or not they have students.

What Is to Be Done?

Eschewing all school reforms, and conceding that the rich cannot be robbed quite yet, what does Ladd actually want to do? When we turn to her practical agenda, we can see just how important the teachers unions are to the Broader, Bolder coalition: most of the key reforms Ladd proposes have nothing to do with ending poverty in any direct way, but instead are directed toward employing more professionals for tasks outside the regular K–12 classroom:

Establish preschool programs. Though she admits the evidence on the effectiveness of Head Start and other large-scale preschool programs is disappointing, she calls for their expansion. Yet the poor already have better access to government-funded preschool programs than other families do. If this were the solution to the achievement gap, we would already be well on our way.

Expand school-based health clinics and social services. Ladd wants to hire a vast new number of “school nurses, social welfare counselors and teachers” who would “meet on a regular basis to discuss and address the challenges of individual children,” as if that were not already part and parcel of the special education program into which 15 percent of school-age students already are placed. If that program has not borne fruit, why would its expansion do anything other than provide more adult employment?

Establish quality afterschool and summer programs. Rather than fix the regular day school, Ladd would have the United States pour its energy into programs that would extend the days and hours that children are in school. Although she admits that “research shows...that marginally expanding in-school time without improving how that time is used does not improve learning” she is confident that

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“high intensity summer programs” can do the job, as if any such program could be brought to scale.

Provide high-quality schools for disadvantaged students. “Children in schools serving large proportions of disadvantaged students “ must “have access to high quality teachers, principals, supports for students, and other resources, and...schools” must “be held accountable for the quality of their internal processes and practices.” Ladd plans to hold these schools accountable while at the same time ending the “obsession with test-based outcome

measures” by making sure that every school has a certified teacher, shifting good teachers to schools teaching disadvantaged students (without telling us how to identify those teachers), and looking at the total climate of a school, not just its test scores, when deciding whether it is effective.

Eliminate No Child Left Behind. “In its place the federal government should implement strategies designed to help state and local governments address in a more constructive and positive manner the educational needs of low SES children.” Just exactly how schools themselves are to do this is left unsaid.

In sum, the Broader, Bolder platform is narrow, niggling, naïve, and negligible. Contrary to Ladd’s claims, the unique effects of family income on student achievement are only modest, less than the effects of many of the education reforms Ladd regards as inadequate or worse. Most of the proposals to lift student achievement offered by Ladd and her Broader, Bolder colleagues ignore the many hours children spend at school, proposing instead a potpourri of noneducational services; those services that do have an educational component are to be offered either to preschoolers or to students during their summer vacation or after school. Such initiatives will increase the number of unionized workers in the public sector, but they have never been shown to have more than modest effects on student achievement. They promise little hope of stemming the rising number of single-parent families, a major contributor to both child poverty and low levels of student performance. If reducing poverty and lifting student achievement are the goals, dollars would be better allocated by cutting the taxes on earned income paid by two-parent, working families with children.

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