Equality of Educational Opportunity in the 21st Century:

Revisiting the Conclusions of the Coleman Report

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Abstract

Half a century ago, the Coleman Report determined that differences between schools played little role in the transmission of academic advantages from parents to children. We revisit the findings of the Coleman Report using longitudinal data on academic achievement and postsecondary attendance from two cohorts of high school students in Massachusetts and Texas. Our findings advance the existing school effects literature in three ways. First, we show that the importance of attending an average versus a highly effective school is substantially larger when the outcome is college attendance rather than academic achievement. Second, we allow school effects to differ by income and race, and find large gaps in school effectiveness by family income and race among students in the same school that are much more pronounced for college attendance than for test scores. Third, we find that differences in school quality matter more for the reproduction of inequality than the Coleman Report and subsequent studies focused only on test scores suggested, increasing inequality in college attendance by family income while reducing it by race. We conclude that in the 21st century, the central disadvantage that students face in gaining access to higher quality high school experiences is family income.