

1. Adversity

In 2013, the United States reached an educational milestone. For the first time, a majority of the country's public school students – 51 percent of them, to be precise – fell below the federal government's threshold for being "low income," meaning they were eligible for a free or subsidized school lunch. This wasn't an overnight development; according to data compiled by the Southern Education Foundation, the percentage of American public school students who are low income has been rising steadily since the foundation started tracking the number in 1989. (Back then fewer than a third of students met the definition.) Passing the 50 percent mark may be a symbolic distinction, but as symbols go it is an important one. It means that the challenge of teaching low-income children can no longer be considered a side issue in American education. Helping poor kids succeed is now, by definition, the central mission of American public schools and, by extension, a central responsibility of the American public.

It is a responsibility we are failing to meet. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, the gap in eighth-grade reading and math test scores between low-income students and their wealthier peers hasn't shrunk at all over the past 20 years. (The gap between poor and wealthier fourth-grade students narrowed during those two decades, but only by a tiny amount.) Meanwhile, the difference between the SAT scores of wealthy and poor high school seniors has actually increased over the past 30 years, from a 90-point gap (on an 800-point scale) in the 1980s to a 125-point gap today. The disparity in college-attainment rates between affluent and low-income students has also risen sharply. And these days, unless children from poor families get a college degree, their economic mobility is severely restricted: Young people who grow up in families in the lowest income quintile (with household income below about \$21,500) and don't obtain a B.A. now have just a one in two chance of escaping that bottom economic bracket as adults.