



Introductory Comments

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Good morning. It's wonderful to see so many friends and colleagues here today. My name is Michael Petrilli, and in August I took over as the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, one of the nation's leading education-policy think tanks, as well as an education-reform advocacy organization in the great state of Ohio, and a charter school authorizer in the great city of Dayton. Welcome to our Education for Upward Mobility conference.

Today is a rare chance for those of us engaged in the raucous and sometimes vitriolic education-reform debate to step back and consider the path we find ourselves upon. The goal is to seek an answer to a fundamental question, perhaps one of the most important questions in America today: How can we help children born into poverty transcend their disadvantages and enter the middle class as adults? And in particular, what role can our schools play?

This isn't a new question. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act fifty years ago, he remarked that, "As a son of a tenant farmer, I know that education is the only valid passport from poverty."

Or, as Jeb Bush put it two weeks ago, here in Washington: "Education is the great equalizer."

What is new is the nagging concern (shared across the ideological spectrum) that social mobility in the U.S. has stalled. As conservative scholar Peter Wehner wrote recently, "Two-thirds of Americans believe that it will be harder for them to achieve the American Dream than it was for their parents, and three-quarters believe that it will be harder still for their children and grandchildren to do the same." And sure enough, the numbers are sobering, particularly for the poorest among us. Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution explains, "Children born on the bottom rung have a four-in-ten chance of remaining stuck there in adulthood."

There's little doubt that education and opportunity are tightly joined in the twenty-first-century economy. Almost every week brings a new study demonstrating that highly skilled workers are rewarded with stronger pay and excellent working conditions, while Americans with few skills are struggling.

Expanding educational achievement, then, is a clear route to expanding economic opportunity. Yet much of our public discourse ends there. Of course more young Americans need better education in

order to succeed, especially young Americans growing up in poverty. But what kind of education, and to what end? Is the goal college for all? What do we mean by college? Is that too narrow an objective? How realistic is it? Do our young people mostly need a strong foundation in academics? What role should so-called non-cognitive skills play? Should technical education make a comeback? After all, current policy stresses getting students college and career ready. But what exactly does that mean—especially the career part? How about apprenticeships? Can we learn from the military’s success in working with disadvantaged youth?

Finding better answers to these questions is critically important if we want to make headway in interrupting intergenerational poverty, which is the REAL goal of the education-reform movement, the ultimate student outcome that we’re working so hard to achieve.

That’s what we’re after today.

To be sure, schools aren’t the only institutions responsible for boosting upward mobility. Far from it. Yet for years we’ve been having a debate between the education reformers, on one side, and the fix-poverty-first crowd on the other. Like many debates in education, that’s a silly argument, based on a false dichotomy. Of course schools can’t do it alone. But of course schools could be doing more.

There will surely be times today when we end up talking about non-school interventions. That’s OK, to a point. But as your moderator, I’m going to try to keep us focused on what our education system can do to stem intergenerational poverty—not because it has to do it alone, but because most of us in this room spend our days trying to improve *that* system. If we get sidetracked by issues like the minimum wage, or the Earned Income Tax Credit, or housing policy, or health care, or immigration, or criminal-justice reform, or birth control, we’ll never get our arms around the educational part of the solution. So let me say it again: Education is not the only path to upward mobility. But it is the path we’re going to focus on today.

And no, boosting upward mobility is not the only purpose of our education system. Every child in America, regardless of his or her socio-economic status, deserves to go to great schools, to be challenged, to learn something new every day. To claim his or her intellectual inheritance. We at Fordham tend to agree with AEI’s Rick Hess that the so-called “achievement gap mania” has led too many of our colleagues to ignore the needs of middle-class or upper-middle-class students, and of students who are already achieving at or above the proficiency level.

But today, our focus is on the poor. Especially the 20 to 25 percent of children who are growing up below the poverty line.

The genesis of this conference was a gut feeling—a nagging, suspicious feeling—that those of us in the education-reform movement might be barking up the wrong tree. Namely, that we might be overly focused on college as THE pathway to the middle class, and not focused enough on all of the other possible routes. A few years ago, I decided that I wanted to better understand the anti-poverty

literature, so I started talking to people like Ron Haskins, Isabel Sawhill, and Sheldon Danziger, and I asked them what to read, and who else to talk to. What became clear to me is that the anti-poverty community surely doesn't embrace the college-for-all strategy. I started writing about this, first on *Education Week's* Bridging Differences blog with Deborah Meier, and then in outlets like *Slate*, making the case, as others like Bob Schwartz did long before me, that we need a more balanced approach. And the reaction from friends was fierce: "You're giving up on kids," they said; "would you want anything less than college for your own children, Mike?" they asked; "do you just want to consign people to a life of low wage work and poverty?"

These are good questions, worthy of good answers. Today we're going to try to find some.

My hope today is to step back and look at the theory of action that is guiding most of our reform efforts, and allow ourselves to question whether that theory is in fact sound. If it's not, many of our policies and day-to-day actions could be misguided.

And what is our theory of action? That's guiding most K-12 education reforms today? Here's how I would describe it:

We look at an economy that continues to reward people with college degrees and with measurable skills—and an economy that is punishing people without degrees and without skills. We see a widening gap in this country between the highly educated and the poorly educated—gaps that show up not only in income inequality, but also in family formation, civic participation, health, happiness, you name it.

So we conclude that we need to get dramatically more young people—and especially low-income young people—into and through higher education. Ideally that means four-year degrees, though two-year degrees and industry credentials are good, too. We firmly believe that a high school diploma is not enough.

That gets us off and running on today's reform agenda—starting with enriching pre-schools; Common Core for grades K-12; effective teachers; no-excuses, college-prep charter schools; and intensive efforts to help first-generation college students make it not just to, but through college. Most of the focus is on academics—especially in reading and math—though we share a growing interest in non-cognitive skills, or what some call performance character—particularly the traits that will help students persist in high school and in post-secondary education.

Some of us will acknowledge that other supports along the way are helpful—from health clinics in schools, to resources for parents, to wage supports, and on and on. But the goal remains the same: Upward mobility via education, in pre-k through college.

This worldview looks at an eighteen year old who grows up poor, graduates high school, and starts working full-time in a low-wage job as something of a failure. We failed that kid. We didn't get him to and through post-secondary education. He ended up on the wrong side of a sharp educational divide.

What I want to ask today—with an open mind and without knowing the answer—is whether that theory of action, whether that worldview, makes sense.

What if that eighteen year old, for example, goes on to stay in that low-wage job, gaining important skills along the way, and starts to get raises? What if that eighteen year old avoids the poverty traps of early or single fatherhood, incarceration, and substance abuse? What if by age twenty-four that young man is earning \$25,000 a year, is self-sufficient, a good role model, and an upstanding member of his community. Have we failed him? What if at twenty-four, he's now ready to gain some additional skills, get an industry-certified credential in order to get one of those middle-skilled jobs, which, by the way, are quite plentiful?

What if we're wrong that stopping with a high school diploma is equivalent to a life of certain poverty? What if there's no sharp educational divide—it's more like an educational continuum, but we've ignored the routes in the middle of that continuum—the middle-class jobs that require technical skills?

What if by putting all of our focus on preparing students for higher education, we're overlooking other issues that matter just as much, like decisions around parenting or a strong work ethic? Or the acquisition of useful workplace skills while *IN* high school? What if by spending all of our efforts trying to boost the proportion of low-income students who are making it through college from 10 percent to, say, 20 percent, we're ignoring the needs of the other 80 percent?

What if we're wrong that low-wage work is a cause of poverty? What if we learn that the true cause of poverty in America is not working at all? What if we put our minds toward solving *that* problem?

My hope is that we can have an honest conversation about these issues and more, and find a middle ground between the utopianism that characterizes so much of the reform movement (“Let’s get every child college and career ready!”) and the defeatism that emanates from too many corners of the education system (“There’s nothing we can do until we end poverty!”).

We’ll start with the end in mind—what does success look like for low-income young people during the critical eighteen to twenty-four years? What is the role of higher education in helping poor children climb the ladder to the middle class? What about the so-called success sequence, including working full-time and delaying childbearing? Apprenticeships? Industry credentials?

Then we’ll go backwards, taking a life-cycle approach. We’ll tackle high schools, considering how to make sure there are “multiple pathways” available for young people—all of them reaching a worthwhile destination. Then we’ll look at pre-k to eight, the foundational years. And we’ll finish with a dynamic panel about the policy implications of all that we’ve learned—what does it mean for Common Core, for school choice, for tracking or ability grouping, for school discipline or extra-curricular activities?

At lunch, we’ll hear from Hugh Price, the former president of the National Urban League, who just published a great book, *Strugglers into Strivers: What the Military Can Teach Us About How Young People Learn and Grow*. Is there any institution in our country that does a better job than the military at helping low-income youngsters climb the ladder to the middle class? I doubt it. What can we learn from *it*?

So again, let's keep an open mind, let's ask tough questions and let's be willing to challenge our theory of action. And when we disagree, let us remember that we still have a shared goal in sharply reducing intergenerational poverty and spurring upward mobility. The only question is how.

With that, let me invite our first panel to the stage. Thank you.