The Coleman Report at Fifty: Its Legacy and Implications for Future Research on Equality of Opportunity



KARL ALEXANDER AND STEPHEN L. MORGAN

July 2016 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the release of Equality of Educational Opportunity (hereafter EEO), commonly known as the Coleman Report after the lead investigator of the research team, James S. Coleman (Coleman et al. 1966). The Coleman Report and Educational Inequality Fifty Years Later celebrates the occasion. To set the stage for the papers that follow, we take a brief look in this introduction back to the origins of EEO in the 1960s and its immediate impact on scholarship and the policy debate. But this issue, in intent and execution, is decidedly forward-looking. Our contributors include some of the nation's leading authorities on issues at the intersection of schooling, race, and social inequality. They appraise EEO's lasting value, the continuing relevance of the issues it addressed, and the ways in which its research approach has stood the test of time, but their larger contribution is to forge, by way of example, a recast equality of educational opportunity research agenda appropriate to twenty-first-century America. As a bridge between then and now, we conclude our introduction with an overview of educational inequality as it now stands, through the lens of the EEO report. That exercise centers on

conditions in Baltimore City, Coleman's home base when leading the EEO team.

BACKGROUND

Commissioned by Congress in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the EEO report is located at the center of that era's struggle to desegregate America's public schools. Here is the authorizing language from section 402 of the Civil Rights Act:

The Commissioner [of Education] shall conduct a survey and make a report to the President and the Congress, within two years of the enactment, concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunity for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public institutions at all levels in the United States, its territories and possessions, and the District of Columbia.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 pushed a sometimes reluctant country into a new era in pursuit of civil rights for black Americans. By virtue of its provenance in the act, EEO was destined to achieve landmark status. That has proven to be the case: written in a highly

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