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THE EDUCATION OF JESSICA RIVERA

Kim Phillips-Fein

Jessica Rivera (not her real name) is a slight, composed 20-year-old Hunter College student. She grew up in the Bronx, raised by her mother and extended family. No one in her family has completed college, so Rivera was thrilled to get accepted to Hunter College, one of the best schools in the City University of New York. "It was my top choice," she says.

In the legendary heyday of City College in the 1930s and '40s, Rivera's could have been a classic story of upward mobility. Had she enjoyed similar opportunities, she might even have wound up with Irving Howe and Daniel Bell, "arguing the world" in the cafeteria alcoves. But Rivera's mother—who was injured at the Bronx factory that she worked at many years ago—is on public assistance. When Rivera turned 18, welfare caseworkers told her she would have to report for twenty to thirty hours a week to the city's Work Experience Program (WEP) if she wanted to keep collecting the benefits she and her mother depend on. "They offered me jobs working in the park, cleaning toilets, cleaning transportation." The long hours would have made it nearly impossible to continue at Hunter as a full-time student. At 18, Rivera was faced with a choice between quitting school for a dead-end job and losing her family's income.

For middle-class Americans, society offers myriad incentives for higher education: scholarships, interest-free loans and the "Hope" tax credits. But for women on welfare, it's a different story. In September the 1996 welfare reform law was up for Congressional reauthorization. The vote did not happen then, because of divergences between a bill in the Senate, written by moderate Republicans and Democrats, and the Bush Administration's vision of welfare reform, reflected in a House bill. The welfare law expired September 30, and no compromise bill or temporary legislation is yet ready to take its place.

One of the sticking points was that the Senate legislation would have made it easier for welfare recipients to go to college. Bush, however, told the *New York Times* in July that he does not think a college education teaches "the importance of work," nor does he think it can "[help] people achieve the dignity necessary so that they can live a free life, free from government control." Now that all three

branches of government are controlled by Republicans, it seems likely that the Bush Administration's vision will soon be reflected in law.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 mandates that recipients of public assistance work in return for their checks. They must either find jobs or, failing this, participate in state-run work programs for a minimum of thirty hours a week (split between twenty hours of paid or unpaid work, and ten hours of participation in other programs like job-search services). Should states fail to meet this work requirement, they face the loss of federal grants. (Many cities, like New York, have raised the number of required work hours above the federal minimum—in the case of New York, to thirty-five per week. It's called a "simulated work week.")

Under the 1996 law, college education cannot be substituted for any part of the primary work requirement. In New York City the result is clear: Before welfare reform, 28,000 CUNY students were on welfare. By spring 2002, 5,000 were—a decline even steeper than the celebrated 60 percent drop in New York City's welfare rolls. Today, although nearly 60 percent of welfare recipients in the city lack a high school diploma or a GED, only 2 percent are enrolled in ESL or GED programs, and fewer than 4 percent are engaged in full-time education or training. "New York City has one of the most sophisticated systems of higher education in the country, but welfare recipients are essentially shut out of it," says Wendy Bach, an attorney at the Urban Justice Center who works with welfare recipients.

The basic presumption behind welfare reform is the harsh moral logic of the workhouse. Welfare recipients, so the theory goes, are poor because they lack the discipline to hold down a job. But women who are struggling to seize hold of a little bit of upward mobility have a different experience: They feel like they work all the time.

Patricia Williams, a 32-year-old Brooklyn native and mother of a gorgeous, energetic 18-month-old girl, graduated from Hunter last year. She plans to go back to school someday for a master's. "I want to run a high-quality daycare center," says Williams, who was orphaned at an early age. When she started working, she did temp jobs—"everything from assembling the folders for the new Macy's event to setting up perfume samples to shelling nuts." After a while she decided to get an associate's degree in computer services. Lacking parents who could help her out, she applied for welfare as a kind of financial aid. "I went on public assistance to get ahead." After completing her degree, she enrolled at Hunter. But then came welfare reform, and she had to enter WEP.

William's first assignment under WEP was housekeeping at a community senior-citizen center in downtown Manhattan. It wasn't a job she would have chosen—she lives in Brooklyn and commutes to Hunter, on the Upper East Side, for school. But she got up at 5:30 every morning to be at work at 7:30, "cleaning bathrooms and gathering garbage." At noon, she went uptown for class, then back downtown in the late afternoon for another stint of maid work. At the community center, "they knew me as Pat the WEP worker," she said. "They didn't know that I had my associate's, or that I was working toward my bachelor's."

The final straw came in her last semester at Hunter. She asked her supervisor for a change in her schedule, so that she could fulfill a student teaching requirement she needed in order to graduate. “I said I would work late, on weekends.” When WEP refused, she quit. Immediately, she lost her food stamps and Medicaid. At a hearing downtown, she says, she asked a city representative, “Is it fair that I am being pulled out of school to do a dead-end WEP job?” The city worker replied, “You need to know what commitment is and what it takes to report to work. . . .”

Even as New York moves to the center of the national debate over welfare policy, local politicians are starting to respond to pressure to change the law—much of which is coming from welfare recipients themselves. In 2000 the Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI), a Hunter-based organization of current and former welfare recipients, successfully lobbied the state legislature to enact a bill permitting work-study and internships to substitute for work requirements. In spring 2002 Gifford Miller, the Speaker of the City Council, proposed a bill allowing welfare recipients to substitute college course work for WEP. Meanwhile, in Maine, legislators have used state-level funds to support college students on welfare. The program (called Parents as Scholars) has been very successful. The women it serves earn a median wage of \$11.71 upon graduation—compared with \$8 for women before entering college; they are also more likely to work in jobs that offer health benefits. Ninety percent of Maine women who earned a degree while on welfare have left the rolls, with every indication that they will stay off.

But while innovative local programs are all to the good, the restrictive federal policies with regard to college for welfare recipients are part of a larger social shift toward a constriction of access to higher education for poor and working-class Americans. . . .

When Bush ran for president in 2000, he described himself as the “education President,” because ever since Horatio Alger, education has been touted as the key to upward mobility. But in truth, the question of who has access to college has always been deeply social and political. College enrollments exploded during the great postwar boom, in the heyday of high union density and the welfare state, and today’s college gap simultaneously reflects and perpetuates the haughty isolation of the rich.

Young women like Jessica Rivera, though, clearly benefit from whatever changes local organizations can make. Just when she was about to give up on school, Rivera learned about WRI. With legal help provided by the advocacy group, she successfully pleaded her case before a hearing officer to substitute work-study hours for WEP under the state law. The rising junior says she isn’t yet sure what she wants to major in, but she knows she wants to get a master’s degree—even, someday, a PhD. “Who wants to be on welfare? I’m going to have my own job and be independent—I don’t need to depend on anybody,” she says cheerfully. But, at the same time, when she thinks about her mother, Rivera’s face grows sad and reflective. With a gentleness that seems to contradict her spunk, she softly says, “Some people just have to be on welfare.” It is anybody’s guess what our President—whose Poppy surely paid for Yale—thinks young women like Rivera will learn about responsibility or commitment picking up trash in Central Park.



“SAVAGE INEQUALITIES” REVISITED

Bob Feldman

Richer, Whiter School Districts Are Still Getting More Public Funds, While the Federal Government Looks the Other Way

In the late 1980s, I taught health and social studies in a New York City public school. My students came largely from African-American and Caribbean families, and the school was located in a high-poverty district. Because funding was so tight, we had no textbooks for a required eighth-grade health class, no classroom maps for seventh- and eighth-grade history classes, and no photocopying machines that teachers or students could use for free. There was also no school newspaper or year-book, and the school band had fewer than twenty instruments.

The conditions in this school illustrated a crisis of funding inequality in the U.S. public school system. In his 1991 book *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol, a long-time critic of unequal education, famously exposed this crisis. He noted, for instance, that schools in the rich suburbs of New York City spent more than \$11,000 per pupil in 1987, while those in the city itself spent only \$5,500. The story was the same throughout the country: per-capita spending for poor students and students of color in urban areas was a fraction of that in richer, whiter suburbs just miles away.

Over ten years after *Savage Inequalities* was first published, how close has the U.S. public school system come to providing equitable funding for all students—funding that is at least equal between districts, or better yet, higher in poorer areas that have greater needs?

Not very far, according to a new report by the Washington, D.C.-based Education Trust. Entitled “The Funding Gap: Low-Income and Minority Students Receive Fewer Dollars,” the report examines state and local expenditures in 15,000 school districts during 1999–2000. Since federal funds account for only 7% of public school resources, this study of state and local spending zeroes in on the source of funding inequality.

According to the Education Trust study, the poorest 25% of school districts in each state receive an average of \$966 less in state and local funds per pupil than

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the richest 25%. This gap has narrowed by \$173 since 1997, but it does not reflect uniform progress: in nine of 47 states examined, the gap widened by at least \$100. In states like New York and Illinois, spending differences remain staggering, totaling \$2,152 and \$2,060 per student, respectively. These figures, like all those in the study, are adjusted to account for the greater expense of educating students in poor districts and areas with a high cost of living. (See Chart 1.)

Funding inequality puts students of color at a special disadvantage. In two-thirds of states in the Education Trust study, the quarter of school districts with the highest percentage of students of color received at least \$100 less in state and local funding than the quarter of districts with the lowest percentage of students of color. New York topped the charts for racial inequality: the quarter of districts with the highest percentage of students of color received \$2,034 less in state and local funds per student than the quarter of districts enrolling the smallest percentage. (See Chart 2.)

Between 1997 and 2000, 30 of the 47 states studied did move toward providing equal or greater funding for students in poorer districts—and some states made significant progress. Why did this happen? According to Michael Rebell, executive director of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, lawsuits have produced some changes. New Jersey, for instance, began channeling funds to its poorest districts after a court challenge; as of 2000, the state government provided roughly three times as

CHART 1
Poor Students Get Less: States with Largest Per-Student Funding Gaps,
and U.S. Average

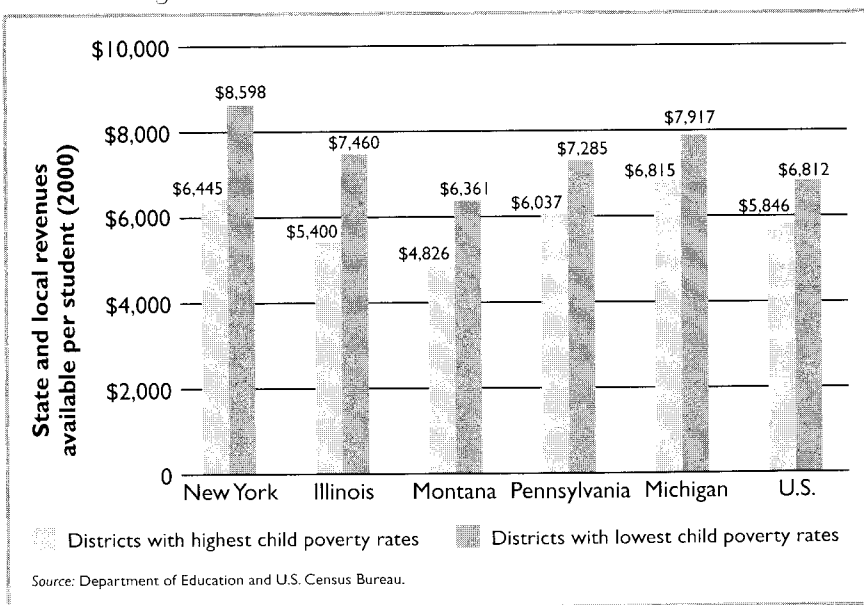
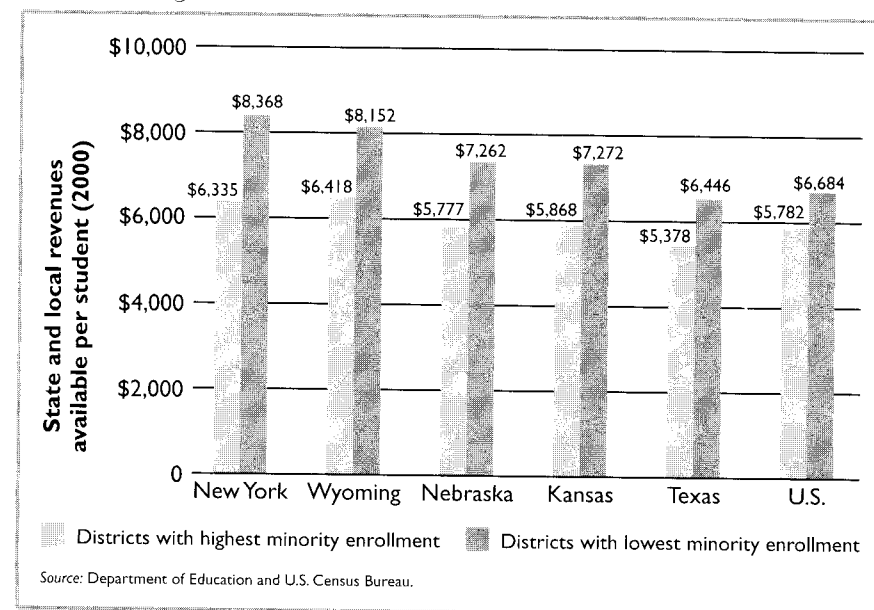


CHART 2
Students of Color Get Less: States with Largest Per-Student Funding Gaps,
and U.S. Average



much per-capita funding to the poorest quarter of districts as it did to the richest quarter. While the state government's targeted funds are counterbalanced by wildly unequal local resources, students in the poorest quarter of districts now receive a net of \$324 more per capita than those in the richest quarter. States like Oregon have achieved similar results not by targeting poorer districts, but by assuming a greater share of responsibility for school funding state-wide. Strategies like New Jersey's and Oregon's help explain the narrowing funding gap, and could be models for other states.

Rebell notes, however, that state-level remedies are fundamentally limited: among states, they are "complex and uneven," and nationally, they leave millions of students unaffected. A more powerful solution might be for the federal government to fund the public school system directly, as governments do in Canada, Japan, and most social democratic countries of Western Europe. Today, the U.S. government does channel money to poor districts through Title I, the largest single federal investment in education. But Title I funds are not intended to equalize funding within states: the federal government leaves that responsibility to state and local authorities, who plainly do not comply.

The needs of students would be justly served by federally guaranteed funding, but current state and federal policies guarantee something very different. As Jonathan Kozol explained a decade ago, "The present system guarantees that those

who can buy a \$1 million home in an affluent suburb will also be able to provide their children with superior schools.” The U.S. public school system is still rigged in favor of students from richer, whiter districts; and as Rebell remarks, the United States remains “the only major developed country in the world that exhibits this shameful pattern of educational inequity.”

Bob Feldman is a Dollars & Sense intern.

RESOURCES

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