

Evidence for opportunity

“Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” So concluded a 1968 report by the Kerner Commission, established by U.S. President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the race riots of 1967. Not only did the report shine a spotlight on America’s unfulfilled promises, it spurred action by politicians and policy-makers. Fifty years later, it is fair—and necessary—to ask if anything has changed. *Healing Our Divided Society*, the 2018 sequel to the Kerner report, argues sadly that gains of the 1970s and early 1980s are evaporating or reversing. But, noting the role of empirical evidence in bolstering past reforms, the new report suggests hopefully that “the quantity and sophistication of scientific information available today far exceeds what was available [in 1968].”

To be sure, there was important progress after the 1968 report: Education achievement gaps narrowed (mostly in the early grades), college participation and degree attainment rose for all groups, and average family wealth for black and Hispanic Americans increased. But the current picture is alarming: Income inequality has exploded; child poverty is unacceptably high, especially in racially concentrated neighborhoods; and black children face considerably lower chances of upward mobility than their white peers.

Thankfully, the editors of *Healing* are right: The U.S. now has more and better policy-relevant research and evidence that can help move the needle. For example, DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin have shown that at-risk adolescents with “identity projects” have increased hopes of staying on track and finishing school; Duncan and Murnane have shown that research-informed strategies and “sensible accountability” can level the playing field between poor and more advantaged youth; and Johnson and Jackson have shown that investments in programs such as Head Start, coupled with sustained K-12 funding, can break the cycle of poverty.

A key takeaway from such examples is that political will is necessary but insufficient without empirical

evidence. The question is whether we can be confident in the supply of good research, in renewed political commitment, and in a revived appetite for evidence-informed policy at all levels of government.

Let’s hope so. To be prepared, we must address worrisome trends. After decades of federal funding, the U.S. has a robust supply of doctoral-level scientists in education and related fields, but federal resources for their continuing work are meager and politically vulnerable; the odds of winning a first-time grant have fallen sharply. Private foundations mostly advance the public good, but few support general education research and some put advocacy ahead of evidence; hearing a foundation officer say, perhaps jokingly, “of course we support objective research...as long as it proves that charter schools work” may not inspire confidence.

To help address these converging trends, Congress should increase funding for behavioral and social sciences, and governments at all levels should consider new approaches to accessing evidence, perhaps modeled on the Congressional Budget Office, the (now defunct) Office of Technology Assess-

ment, or successful state and local experiments, such as the Washington State Institute for Public Policy and research-practice partnerships in Long Beach (California), Chicago, Baltimore, New York, Houston, and elsewhere. Congress should reaffirm commitments to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and the National Academy of Education—reputable producers of nonpartisan and policy-relevant research—and should act on recommendations of the bipartisan Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. Private foundations should redouble their commitment to evidence over ideology and to investing in basic research as well as scrupulous evaluations of their investments.

If there is hope for restoring economic and educational opportunity, research is essential. The proven tradition of relying on science to make the world better cannot end on our watch.

—Michael J. Feuer



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“...policy-relevant research... can help move the needle.”

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