

The Disadvantages Start at Conception



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A growing body of evidence suggests that the United States, far from being the land of opportunity celebrated in our history and our literature, is instead a country where class matters after all, where upward mobility is constrained, especially among those born into the bottom ranks.

What could be done to improve the upward mobility chances of less advantaged children?

First, it would help if more parents were ready to take on the most important responsibility any adult normally assumes, which is the decision to have a child. Unfortunately, for far too many teens and young adults, this is not a carefully planned decision. Half of all children born to women under the age of 30 are born outside of marriage, and 70 percent of all pregnancies to single women in this age group are unplanned. Research shows that access to more effective (but expensive and hard-to-get) forms of contraception could help here. Making Plan B available over the counter is just one example.

Three changes could increase opportunity, economic growth and our competitiveness with other countries.

Second, low-income children enter school far behind their more advantaged peers in vocabulary and learning-related behaviors such as the ability to sit still or follow directions. High-quality early-education programs can compensate for some of these deficits, but too few children are enrolled and too few programs are high quality. These children tend to fall further behind as they progress through school. Large numbers drop out of high school, enter the criminal justice system, or end up unemployed or earning very low wages. These trajectories can be changed in part by putting better teachers in the classroom, setting higher standards and expecting students and parents to be full partners in this effort.

Third, no one should graduate from school without the specific skills needed by today's employers. Not everyone is going to benefit from a traditional four-year college degree. But more career and technical education, on-the-job training or community college programs could produce a more highly skilled work force.

These investments have the potential to increase opportunity, economic growth and our

competitiveness with other countries. Will we make the needed changes? Not if we remain overly focused on keeping taxes low and fail to restrain spending on the affluent elderly.