

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/addressing-an-unequal-education-system/>

Even programs designed to reduce inequities in education, finds Abl founder and executive chairman Adam Pisoni, often end up exacerbating those very inequities because of how deeply inequality is baked into the US educational system. While the system may now be at a breaking point due to COVID-19, he adds, there is also a massive opportunity to remind ourselves of the extraordinary value of public education, and find the collective cultural motivation to change.



## Transcript

- So, there was a school within a district we were working with, and before we had gotten to them, they had seen a pretty wide achievement gap, and their belief was, well, part of the problem is that, you know, a lot of students don't understand the value of school.. They don't understand what the purpose of all this is.. So, if we could make school more relevant to their jobs in the future, then they would be more likely to apply themselves.. And so, they created what are called linked learning pathways, or career pathways.. They created two of them.. One was, I think, tech; one was health, and those pathways came with additional requirements for those students.. So, seventh-graders or, rather, ninth-graders are coming into high school, and guidance counselors were looking at these transcripts and saying some of these students are too far behind to take the required remediation courses or, you know, retake courses or support courses, and still take the required courses for these pathways.. So, they took this group of students, of which was a double-digit percentage of the student body, and they just put 'em in, like, a third pathway that didn't have a name.. Well, all of those students, a large percentage of those students, ended up failing out because the resources of the school weren't oriented towards that pathway.. They were oriented towards these other pathways..

So, that was an extreme example, maybe, but it's one example where we see over and over that even the programs designed to help students of color or students of low socioeconomic status often hurt them because of the way they bifurcate the resources.. So, you asked the state of the education system.. I mean, I think we are in such a pivotal point where the education system all up is, is deemed by everybody of all parties to be not working for all of our students and to be currently underfunded or, rather, you know, given the money that we're putting in, we don't feel like we're getting the value out, and the pandemic is really showing how important the educational institution is in our country, beyond what we thought.. You know, people tend to think about education as curriculum assessment, about teaching the skills students need to learn, but I'll tell you that teaching content, teaching skills is not the number one or even the number two most important goal for most schools.. Number one is safety for every school, but people are entrusting their children with a school, and that means a lot of things beyond just, you know, school shootings or something.. I mean, schools feed millions of students a year that can't otherwise afford to eat.. They provide mental health services to millions of students a year who otherwise wouldn't have those opportunities.. That is such a large piece of what school is today.. The number two part of school isn't education either.. It is helping the economy by making sure the parents can go to work, and, you know, schools are the largest employer in almost every city that they're in..

And number three is educating students on content they need to, you know, be successful, and the skills they need, but what we're seeing here, I think, is a breaking point where we're gonna see, I hope, some major changes coming in the next years.. I think people didn't realize how important education system was for a functioning economy and society, but I think we, as a country, have to decide the kind of education system we want.. So, what I'm seeing is a coming breaking point.. What I don't yet know is the direction we'll go.. And specifically, you know, the way in which I think I was most radicalized is when I got into ABLE, I thought that what the problems were could be solved with policy or programs or funding or things like that, but what I came to believe after watching the last few decades of people trying to fix education through policy and program and funding, is that the problem with education is not the education system.. It is actually, it's a cultural problem that we, as a society, have not decided that we wanna educate all our students, and in fact, we, we have an individualistic society that, that rationally believes that we should be fighting for our own children's best education.. And we're in a bit of a, almost a death

spiral where parents currently believe there's not enough good seats in good schools for, for all kids, and so, they're gonna fight for their students to get the good schools and resources.. By doing so, they are making the whole system worse, which is creating, which is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, making fewer good seats.. And as long as we're on that spiral, then every time we introduce a new program or funding stream or whatever, it ends up getting sort of twisted to benefit a smaller set of students.. The things those parents are doing are rational..

I don't think any of them are bad or, you know, but I think this is the breaking point that we face in education.. I think we're, we're really gonna have to decide the kind of education system we want in the next couple years as we come outta this...