

# The Meritocracy Trap

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Welcome to the United States, known for its equity and promise of the American Dream, which tells the classic rags to riches story that says, if anyone tries their best, they could make it.<sup>1</sup> The American education system plays a crucial role in this idea. It has tried to solve the problem of inequality by standardizing education and providing it to all regardless of race, religion, and income. However, the goal of education and its purpose has not been met anywhere in the country. The differences in funding between private and public schools, along with the discrepancies among public schools when it comes to property tax is quite startling.<sup>2</sup> Public schools with a higher income property tax have an ACT average of around 23.6, while those in lower income areas are around 19.5.<sup>3</sup>

This is rather ironic, considering that the United States is supposed to be one of the leading countries in having an equal and equitable society. Many social studies around the world use the United States to gage how effective or ineffective an egalitarian democratic society functions in a world superpower.<sup>4</sup> While there are many benefits to our current society, like freedom of speech, expression, and

entertainment, democracy, and a sense of ownership and property, our competitive system and meritocracy has created new groups of elites and autocracies that keep others down.

A well-known proposition to the problem of inequality is to tear down natural privilege and create a completely meritocratic society where everyone starts the same and ends up in their final position solely based on how hard they work and how far they can reach in their academics.<sup>5</sup> While on paper this looks good, it only promotes competition and will create a new kind of elite: those with intelligence and a strong work ethic. It also creates a reason to discourage and limit those who do not make it far, because they did not work hard enough or they are not smart enough although this is not always the case. Therefore, these people do not deserve to be discouraged and limited. We can already see evidence of this attitude today, although we are not fully meritocratic.<sup>6</sup>

The solution to this problem of inequality is not introducing higher levels of competition to bring others down to advance one's own position. It creates a mentality that one needs to outclass and compete against everyone, and will

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Cullen. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Krista Mattern, Justine Radunzel, Matt Harmston, *ACT Composite Score by Family Income* (ACT.org 2016). 1

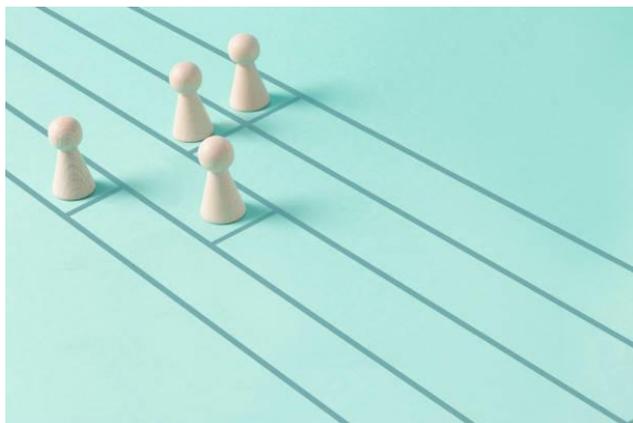
<sup>3</sup> John Winters V. "Variation in Teacher Salaries in Georgia: Does the Property Tax Base Matter?" *Journal of Education Finance* 35, no. 2 (2009): 157–171, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40704383>.

<sup>4</sup> James Kurth, *The United States as a civilizational leader*, (Routledge 2009), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Sacks. *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 33-35  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520932234>.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Lemann. *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. New York City, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

only further increase the inequality we see today.<sup>7</sup>



*A representation of why meritocracy isn't always the best, though it may feel right on paper.*

*Source: Nazan Akpolat, 2019*

Dr. Adam Howard has been researching this issue for more than a decade.<sup>7</sup> His studies and findings about the affluent are quite eye opening. In one of his studies, he taught a class of ten seventh-grade boys in a relatively affluent area. When he asked about homelessness and if the boys had seen anyone homeless around the city, they said they had not. After some discussion, he discovered that they actually had seen someone homeless, they just had ignored them. It is astonishing to see students reach a point of ignorance where they cannot remember if they noticed another human being or not.

While Howard's studies show the widening inequality occurring around the country, his solution is not through revolution and tearing down privilege. Instead, Dr. Howard proposes teaching the affluent about privilege and how to use privilege to help the disadvantaged. He also proposes teaching them why this is more important than competition and amassing more wealth.<sup>7</sup> This is a difficult lesson to teach the affluent, and one cannot simply

point a finger and tell them to do better. Dr. Howard proposes getting to the affluent early and when they are young, teaching them lessons of love and empathy, rather than competition and winning.<sup>8</sup> This way, if the privileged grow into positions of power, they can use that power to help the disadvantaged.

The aristocracy of this semi-meritocracy and the issue of competition among the affluent is the major contributing factor to the inequality we see in education today. The solution, however, should not be to fight and point fingers. People do not change their minds this way. Instead, to solve this problem of inequality, it is necessary to reach out and meet the privileged where they are, and try to teach them lessons of compassion and empathy.

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Howard, *Learning Privilege: Lessons of Power and Identity in Affluent Schooling* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis 2007), 14, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Howard, *Learning Privilege*, 35, 37

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