

The O'Connor Project

Can we end racial discrimination without affirmative action? Here's what it will take.

BY LISBETH B. SCHORR

JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR, SPEAKING FOR A MAJORITY of the U.S. Supreme Court in the University of Michigan affirmative-action case, declared, "We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary ..."

What would it take for that to become a reality?

In what we might call The O'Connor Project, we would have to commit ourselves to eliminating racial disparities at the starting line and at four subsequent crucial points, each of them involving changes that we already know how to make. By assembling existing knowledge, deepening it and scaling up from current isolated successes, our society could make a long-term commitment to action in each of these five arenas so that minority college applicants of 2028 would be educationally so well-equipped that they would not need the extra help of racial preferences.

Here are the concrete steps that would achieve that goal:

1. Eliminating racial disparities in birth outcomes.

We could accomplish this by reducing the incidence of teen births and ensuring every pregnant woman high-quality prenatal care. Birth outcomes that predispose children to trouble at school, such as low birth weight (found twice as often among African American babies as among whites), are associated with serious cognitive impairments, behavioral and learning disorders, health problems and school failure.

2. Eliminating racial disparities in school readiness.

By harnessing the tremendous growth in understanding of how parental support and early education (an essential part of high-quality child care) can equip young children for school learning, we could reduce by at least half the existing racial gap. A child's ability to reason and to master language and math depends on the stimulation, caring relationships and supports he or she experiences long before entering school. The founders of Head Start and other early childhood education programs knew this 40 years ago. Their successors are now proving it.

Because school readiness is more than a set of mechanical skills, the most effective ways to set children on a path to school success rely less on flash cards than on attention to emotional, social and health needs, and to the necessity of nurturing, supportive adults in settings that are language-rich and knowledge-centered. For families where parents are impaired by depression, substance abuse, personality disorders or domestic violence, programs must compensate by ensur-

ing that all young children can grow up in environments that are safe, nurturing, stimulating and responsive.

3. Eliminating racial disparities in the opportunities offered by elementary, middle and high schools. Many individual schools have successfully broken the link between academic achievement and racial, economic and family background. Most recently, entire school districts have begun to shrink the race-based gaps that were once seen as immutable. Success has been most dramatic in the early grades. The latest results of nationwide testing among fourth-graders have shown universal improvement, and a significant narrowing in the gaps among racial groups.

Progress in middle schools has been slower and more sporadic, as broader reform efforts have collided with lesser capacity among front-line educators and greater chaos, indifference and hostility in the bureaucratic environment.

In high schools, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is among those showing that we know enough to attack the gross inequities in preparing underserved young people for college. The foundation is successfully investing in the creation of smaller, more personalized learning environments, where every student is known by a school adult and held to high expectations.

Schools at every level and in every neighborhood must be able to attract, retain and support fully competent teachers, ending the scandal of children who need the most skilled instructors being taught by those least able to teach.

4. Eliminating racial disparities in the opportunities for adolescents to make a healthy transition into young adulthood. Here, too, our understanding of what works has taken a quantum leap in the last two decades. Local organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters have been successful in matching at-risk young people with adult mentors. These trusting relationships produce measurable decreases in first-time drug use and improvements in school performance and behavior. Boys and Girls clubs, YMCAs, 4-H clubs, AmeriCorps and schools are running programs that are keeping youngsters constructively occupied during the hours when teens without such alternatives often get into trouble. In these ways, local communities are already well ahead of federal policy-makers in putting together the adults and resources that influence youth in a positive direction, complementing the work of schools in strengthening the capacity of adolescents to become competent and confident adults.

5. Eliminating racial disparities in the opportunities

that families have to provide their children a good start in life. Most families share the same dreams for their children and would, if they could, provide them with safe neighborhoods, decent housing and good schools. Most would transmit to their children the security and optimism that usually comes to parents who work at jobs that pay a living wage. Most would provide the guidance that children need to grow into productive adults if they could command the resources to afford regular meals, books, computers and time. And yet large numbers of families, especially African American families in America’s inner cities, cannot realize these dreams without help—from kin, from neighbors and from social institutions, including government. We know how to provide families with supports to enhance their economic well-being, the safety of their neighborhoods, the cohesiveness of their social environment and their parental abilities. We have work to do, though, before we are able to provide the needed supports at sufficient scale and in ways that a majority of Americans find compatible with their values. But that objective is also within our reach.

THE LEADERSHIP AND THE FINANCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL resources for such an ambitious undertaking as the O’Connor Project would have to come from a broad partnership, including government and public officials at all levels, philanthropy, the professional and academic communities, and the local groups throughout the country that are already working to make their communities a better place to live.

While we seek a wide base of support for committing the necessary resources, one model we could look to as a way to begin is the one now flourishing in Great Britain. When Prime Minister Tony Blair took office, the long-standing gap between the least and most advantaged populations was continuing to increase. He committed his government to eliminating poverty among children, to radically reducing income-based health disparities, and to narrowing the gap between deprived neighborhoods and the rest of the country—all within 20 years. Funding from both government and philanthropy has mobilized an extraordinary array of Britain’s most daring and able individuals into the service of achieving these objectives. In the United States today, the challenge to embrace similarly lofty aspirations may seem particularly daunting, and even unrealistic. At a time of philanthropic retrenchment and fierce cuts in federal, state and local human-service budgets, how can the American public be expected to support an agenda as bold as the O’Connor Project contemplates?

First, we must be realistic about what works. We have already seen teen birth rates and juvenile violent crime decline in response to initiatives of the last two decades, which incorporate some of the principles described above. But the most effective initiatives are typically underfunded and do not reach those most at-risk. And many well-intentioned efforts are not achieving their objectives. We must be prepared to move resources from less effective efforts to more effective ones—and to pay the costs of what it takes to understand the difference.

I calculate that the O’Connor Project would cost somewhere between \$110 billion and \$125 billion a year. (See

MAJOR COSTS OF “THE O’CONNOR PROJECT”	Estimated New Annual Costs
Eliminate racial disparities in birth outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access for all teens to a variety of methods of preventing teen births • Outreach to provide all pregnant women with high-quality prenatal care 	\$3–6 billion
Eliminate racial disparities in school readiness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded parental leave and family-support services • High-quality child care and preschool education targeted to poor and minority children (including infants and toddlers) • Mental-health and social services for high-risk children and their families • Outreach to ensure that all young children receive high-quality health care 	\$27–30 billion
Eliminate racial disparities in public schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform of schools and school districts; training, recruitment and retention of competent teachers • School construction and repairs in depleted neighborhoods 	\$40–45 billion
Eliminate racial disparities in healthy transition into young adulthood <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After-school, school and community programs that support adolescent development and equip students for employment and post-secondary education • Outreach to ensure that all adolescents obtain high-quality health care 	\$5–6 billion
Eliminate racial disparities in the opportunities for families to provide their children a good start in life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased child allowances, tax credits and earnings supplements • Expanded support of decent housing in safe neighborhoods 	\$35–40 billion
<p><i>Source: These estimates are based primarily on calculations taken from One Percent for the Kids, edited by Isabel Sawhill (Brookings Institution Press, 2003); also from The Two Percent Solution: Fixing America’s Problems in Ways Liberals and Conservatives Can Love, by Matthew Miller, (PublicAffairs Press, 2003).</i></p>	

table above.) These estimates do not include the costs to universal health coverage for children, adolescents and pregnant women, which the nation seems gradually to be moving toward for reasons other than the elimination of racial disparities.) This amount could be recouped by rescinding the portion of the 2001 tax cut allocated to the wealthiest 5 percent of U.S. families when fully phased in (about \$88 billion a year), together with a modest increase in the gas tax or a 25 percent cut in “corporate welfare.”

To bring the nation’s actions in line with our best intentions, in just the ways that Justice O’Connor’s decision implies, requires action on an agenda that is coherent, bold—and difficult. But don’t let anybody tell you that it can’t be done or that we don’t know how to do it. ■

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