NEPC Review: Some Assembly Required: How a More Flexible Learning Ecosystem Can Better Serve All Kids and Unlock Innovation (Bellwether, August 2022)

Reviewed by:

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Arizona State University

November 2022

National Education Policy Center

Acknowledgements

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Summary

A recent report from Bellwether details what the authors call, "assembly-based education," a concept described as a hypothetical ecosystem that removes schools as a central education component. Instead, the plan proposes giving families the ability and funding to choose among varied learning opportunities. The approach is presented as helping to remove some barriers for lower-income families and to facilitate new communities based on shared interests rather than geography. The report also argues that the approach is timely and practical, pointing to the recent growth of school choice and supplemental learning. The concept, however, undermines societal investment in neighborhood schools and therefore runs counter to research demonstrating that many families, youth, and communities work hard to protect and improve their neighborhood schools, especially in marginalized communities. The report also has only minimal reference to peer-reviewed research, and it often presents data in misleading, decontextualized, and inconsistent ways. Although a deeper examination of education from an ecological perspective is warranted, this particular proposal ignores research reflecting the voices and stories of those who are most marginalized. As presented, therefore, this concept of an assembly-based education ecosystem fails to genuinely center equity and educational excellence and instead elevates choice as the greatest good in an education system.

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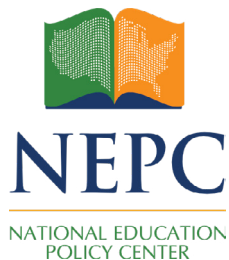
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I. Introduction

The global pandemic COVID-19 ushered in a unique disruption to U.S. public education in 2020-2021. As schools closed physically nationwide, educators worked hard to provide alternative learning opportunities for students confined to their homes. Concurrently, parents and other caregivers working from home struggled for balance while taking care of children, who in many cases were learning to navigate online school. Even when schools reopened, families who were immunocompromised or lived in intergenerational households often mitigated higher COVID risks to elders and others by keeping children out of physical schools. Not surprisingly, alternatives featuring small groups of students (learning pods or microschools[1], for example) or private online courses (Outschool,[2] for example), became attractive for families with required resources.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2020, police murders of Black people, including George Floyd and Breanna Taylor, prompted widespread racial, social, and political unrest. Many youth and community activists protested police presence in schools and demanded more equitable treatment and curriculum. Black families grappled with whether schools could provide a safe and affirming environment for their children. In combination with COVID-19, these circumstances also motivated some Black families to experiment with schooling alternatives, including homeschooling and unschooling.[3]

Many educators saw the moment of increased participation in school choice options and learning outside school walls, in combination with social unrest, as an opportunity to rethink school reform[4]. Many outside of education, however, saw an opportunity to increase profits by expanding school choice options and services.[5] With these conditions as backdrop,

Bellwether report *Some Assembly Required: How a More Flexible Learning Ecosystem Can Better Serve All Kids and Unlock Innovation,* authored by Juliet Squire and Alex Spurrier, promote assembly-based education as an alternative. This education "ecosystem" purportedly prioritizes families and students by enabling them to choose among learning opportunities that providers design to meet their interests. Additionally, the system's theoretical benefits include removing barriers for lower-income families and facilitating new communities based on common interests rather than neighborhoods.

More specifically, within two sections, this report provides conclusions, the first including nine claims that assembly-based education can fix educational problems, and the second including six risks of, and barriers to, implementing the model. It also includes a small section on the role of technology. To conclude, the report lists several questions about the purpose and role of education, including whether it is a public or private good.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

In the first major section, which asserts that assembly-based education can solve "old problems,"[6] the report proposes several advantages. These include claims that: More outside partners collaborating to provide services would make more reliably excellent services available to students; more services would allow students to tailor their educational experiences to their individual interests and needs, allowing them to change their experience without necessarily changing schools; equitable access would allow students to choose learning and extracurricular activities their families might not be able to afford otherwise; and, having been empowered to design their own education, students would be better prepared for adult responsibilities. Families and students would also benefit from access to a broader set of talented and highly qualified adults beyond schools, while providers would benefit from flexibility and capacity to meet student's changing needs.

The report also acknowledges several potential risks and barriers to implementing the system. To ensure equitable access, families would have to know about and be fully empowered—including by receiving funding where necessary—to choose among opportunities. Infrastructure would need to be developed to fully inform families and providers as well as to help families navigate their choices. To overcome the risk of disrupting existing school communities, other potentially diverse communities beyond the school would need to be facilitated. And, policies would be required to ensure accountability without stifling innovation, and political opposition would need to be countered by a diverse and bipartisan group of parents.

The segment on technology suggests it would be key to addressing risks and barriers by providing equitable and cost-efficient access to opportunities, facilitating community building, offering accountability measures through data transparency, and safely sharing relevant information across users.

Overall, the report asserts that assembly-based education would offer students from all ra-

cial and socioeconomic backgrounds a better quality and more meaningful education. Concurrently, educators would have more opportunity to provide services aligned with their talents. The report does acknowledge that the concept, if not implemented correctly, could contribute to increased educational disparities, and asserts that assembly-based education "must be conducted responsibly, with full consideration of unintended consequences"[7] and likely would require slow implementation.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report's underlying argument for supporting assembly-based education in the U.S. is threefold. First, it claims that the purpose and role of school has changed since the 1800s, with schools currently unable to adequately serve a more diverse student population with a wide range of needs and desires. Second, educational inequities exist between privileged students who can supplement school learning and those with fewer resources. As evidence, the reports points to inadequate academic growth and achievement gaps, connecting them to a mental health crisis, decreased postsecondary achievement, more unemployment, and less civic engagement. Third, families and students have shown a desire for learning beyond schools through increased engagement and spending in other activities, most significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic (for example, growth of homeschooling, microschooling, and learning pods). Given these rationales, the report attempts to disrupt the concept of schools as a public good and argues that families and students—not schools—should be the center of an education ecosystem.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report relies largely on non-research-based literature, including mainly news articles or reports from advocacy-based organizations and various quantitative data sources offering basic descriptive statistics. Of the 38 footnoted references, only one is from a peer-reviewed academic journal and none are from books.

Oddly, the report proposes the implementation of a new ecosystem grounded in flexible learning beyond schools—but with no reference to a body of existing research on the ecology of education. That research has found deeply rooted education problems often lie beyond schools, including in the strategy at the heart of assembly-based education: the move to privatize public education by promoting choice.[8]

In addition, while the report purports to address inequity, it promotes assembly-based education without acknowledging scholarship exploring the importance of family, youth, and community perspectives on education.[9] A long line of such research illuminates the significant role that public schools play in communities, particularly marginalized communities that are home to lower-income families and families of color. Such research documents that

marginalized communities have organized against massive school closures, indicating that they often value their schools and want them improved rather than abandoned.[10]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

As noted above, the report offers no original research but instead details a conceptual framework unsupported by existing research. It simply incorporates descriptive statistics on academic outcomes and student participation in learning opportunities beyond traditional public schools. Even those data, however, do not provide a sound base for the report's argument.

For example, one of the most misleading components of the report is its reliance on data gathered during COVID-19 to support the notion that families and students desire learning outside of schools—ignoring the reality that many families were forced to make difficult decisions when most U.S. schools closed. Such data illustrates increased participation, primarily from 2020, in such options as homeschooling, microschools, and online tutoring/resources.[11] The report does not acknowledge that increasing participation correlates with limited options families had when physical schools closed during the pandemic. The report also overlooks data suggesting that Black families were among the most disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and often among the most opposed to reopening schools sooner than their white counterparts.[12] Nor does it note that many Black families also opted for homeschooling because racial unrest was at a peak.[13] Similarly, increasing trends for microschools, "learning pods," Khan Academy, and the online learning platform Outschool are presented with little or no context, as if influential circumstances were immaterial.[14]

Finally, the report includes a few other questionable calculations and misuses of data to support its argument that schools' "results are discouraging."[15] For example, the report notes "modest improvement" in national test scores, "slowly upward" graduate rates, and the fact that nearly half of postsecondary students take remedial courses and fewer than half of them graduate within four years.[16] Overlooked in this litany of criticism, however, is the dramatic growth of student enrollment into postsecondary institutions (from 45% in 1960 to 62% in 2020) and increases in four-year graduation rates (from 33% in 1996 to 46% in 2014), with corresponding increases across racial subgroups.[17] These numbers imply that a larger and more diverse student population is accessing and completing postsecondary degrees. Moreover, the claim that nearly half of the students take remedial courses seems to rely on a statistic from 2015-16 indicating that 43% of students had ever taken remedial coursework. Yet a closer look at the data shows that only 19.2% of first-year students took any remedial courses that year, and only 16.9% of full-time first-year students enrolled in a remedial course, a decline from 2003-04 (19.1%). [18, 19] Finally, the report uses an odd mixture of percentages and numbers that makes comparison difficult. For example, microschool enrollment is reported in numbers at the height of the pandemic and school closures (610,000 students in fall, 2020), but then, inconsistently, as a percentage (15%) for June, 2022. It also fails to provide enrollment numbers pre-COVID-19 so readers are unable to compare if the remaining enrollment is significantly higher than before the pandemic.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report justifies its call for a new education ecosystem by describing the existing system as an 1800's "one-size-fits-all system . . . poorly suited" for student success now.[20] The unwarranted assumption is that the current system has not evolved and does not offer diverse and individualized services, resulting in disparate academic outcomes. However, while educational disparities do exist, most negatively impacting marginalized and low-income students, the root causes of the problem largely lie far beyond schools. Instead, these stem from systemic inequities ranging from the history of the slavery of Black people and the genocide of Indigenous people to current issues of police brutality and voter suppression targeting marginalized communities. To ignore these realities is to oversimplify and misdiagnose a complex problem.

In addition to misdiagnosing a central problem and oversimplifying complexities inherent in unlimited choice, the report offers nearly no peer-reviewed evidence to support the conclusion that assembly-based education can offer students broader, more individualized, and more equitable learning opportunities. It relies instead primarily on research published by agenda-driven organizations, with many references to EdChoice. And although the report heavily cites descriptive data from the National Center for Education Statistics, it often highlights statistics inconsistently and without context, contributing to misleading claims and oversimplification of complex problems. Still: The report does include three truths or half-truths.

First, there is a real need to address inequities in access, since the pandemic has made glaringly obvious the advantage that families with resources have in accessing supplemental learning. While some public monies are targeted to low-income families in programs like Title I, wealthier families have much more access to more opportunity. From an educational ecosystem perspective, such funding could, and probably should, be increased, with a greater effort to inform families of opportunities.

Second, the argument for the need to center families and students in any redesign of the education ecosystem is also valid. However, existing research calls into question the notion that simply removing schools from the center will bring stakeholders together. In fact, research has shown successful strides when schools and families/community work to co-design education aimed at achieving more equitable and socially just experiences and outcomes.[21] This finding undermines the report's claim that giving families choice will result in students being better equipped to "contribute to society."[22] But what type of society might be produced under unlimited options? The report fails to explore the dilemma that some families and students might be interested in opportunities that contribute to social injustice. Rather than an equity-centered curriculum offering diverse histories and perspectives, an assembly-based education could allow families to opt into narrowly centered curricula that breed oppressive stereotypes—likely exacerbating prejudices and continued discrimination, polar opposites of the purported equity goals.

Finally, the report's focus on education as an ecosystem encompassing the school as well as the world around it also aligns with existing research—but the report does not employ that research, nor does it examine educational problems from an ecological perspective. Instead,

it simplifies problems and offers market-based solutions that have been shown to exacerbate educational inequities.[23] Moreover, other assumptions related to market-based solutions are problematic. The first is that a public school system driven by educational equity and excellence can successfully compete in a market environment. And the second is that all families and students have the capacity and ability to navigate an ecosystem grounded in school and educational choice. While the report acknowledges challenges with ensuring families are well-informed of opportunities and have support to make relevant choices, the assumption that technology or other infrastructure can largely alleviate these is unsupported.

An educational ecosystem that prioritizes equity would ensure that education remains a public good aimed at giving *all* families equal opportunities. Rather than centering only the school or student, Germain's educational ecological framework, for example, grounds equity as a foundation, centering both the well-being of the individual and the community. This framework "highlights the capacity of schools to serve as drivers of community uplift and political advocacy," so that students, families, and communities can flourish collectively.[24]

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

While the report may offer some food for thought about existing needs in the ecosystem of public education, assembly-based education as presented essentially constitutes a short-sighted attempt to invalidate public schools based on the fallacy that flexible learning for all families can exist in an ecosystem (or market) driven by choice and profits. Indeed, it fails to consider the depth and breadth of research that underscores the extent to which families, youth, and communities value and rely on public schools to meet their needs in ways that an assembly-based education ecosystem, confined by the values of the private market, is unwilling and unable to do. For real solutions to critical problems, policymakers should look elsewhere.

Notes and References

1   Moyer, M.W. (2020, August 18). Pods, microschools and tutors: Can parents solve the education crisis on their own? *New York Times*. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/parenting/school-pods-coronavirus.html

2   Outschool, Inc. (2022). *Outschool is where kids love learning*. Outschool Website. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://outschool.com/about#abl9d2059u

3   "Unschooling is a form of homeschooling that relies on a hands-off approach so that children can learn through their own natural curiosity. With unschooling, there are no formal curricula, learning materials, grades, or tests."

     Heathline (2019). *What is unschooling and why do parents consider it?* Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.healthline.com/health/childrens-health/unschooling

     See also: Akitune, T. (date unknown). Unschooling: The educational movement more Black parents are joining. *Mater Mea*. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from https://matermea.com/unschooling-education-black-families/

4   Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). I'm here for the hard re-set: Post pandemic pedagogy to preserve our culture. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 54*(1), 68-78. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1863883

5   Williamson, B. & Hogan, A. (2020). *Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of Covid-19*. Education International Research. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_eiresearch_gr_commercialisation_privatisation

     Hodge, E., Farely, A., Marachi, R., & Suarez, T. (in progress). *Who profits from a pandemic? A descriptive and social network analysis of school district-vendor contracts.*

6   Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kid and unlock innovation* (p.10). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_August2022_FINAL.pdf

7   Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kid and unlock innovation* (p.14). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_August2022_FINAL.pdf

8   Carter, P.L. & Welner, K.G. (2013). *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*. Oxford University Press.

     Lenhoff, S.W., Singer, J., & Gottfried, M. (2022). Thinking ecologically in educational policy and research. *Peabody Journal of Education, 97*(1), 1-5. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2022.2026715

9   See: Bertrand, M. & Rodela, K.C. (2018). A framework for rethinking educational leadership in the margins: Implications for social justice leadership preparation. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 13*(1), 10-37. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117739414

     Ishimaru, A.M. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.

     Horsford, S.D. & Vasquez Heilig, J. (2014). Community-based education reform in urban contexts:

Implications for leadership, policy, and accountability. *Urban Education*, *49*(8), 867-870. SAGE Publications Inc. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914557647

Warren, M., Hong, S., Rubin, C.H., & Uy, P. (2009). Beyond the bake sale: A community-based relational approach to parent engagement in schools. *Teachers College Record, 111*(9), 2209-2254. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100901

Warren M.R. & Goodman D. (2018). *Lift us up don't push us out!: Voices from the front lines of the educational justice movement.* Beacon Press.

10 For instance, Welton and Freelon explored how Black parents and community members advocated against school closures in communities of low-income Black and Latinx families in Chicago. To keep one school open, they organized a 34-day hunger strike "protesting not just the pending closure...but the intensive privatization of public education and the overall neoliberal educational agenda imposed on the South Side of the city and other Black and Brown neighborhoods across Chicago."

See: Welton, A.D. & Freelon, R. (2018). Community organizing as educational leadership: Lessons from Chicago on the politics of racial justice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *13*(1), 79-104. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117744193

Similarly, Green's research showed that schools were "the heart of the community" and when they closed, even though they could attend a charter school, the limitations created extreme barriers, including that "an entire community of students was 'pushed out' of high school.

See: Green, T. (2017). "We felt they took the heart out of the community": Examining a community-based response to urban school closure. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *25*, 21. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https:///doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2549

See also: Khalifa, M.A., Jennings, M.E., Briscoe, F., Oleszweski, Ashley, M., & Abdi, N. (2014). Racism? Administrative and community perspectives in data-driven decision-making: Systemic perspectives versus technical-rational perspectives. *Urban Education*, *49*(2), 147-181. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085913475635

11 For instance, the report notes that "homeschool rates have increased dramatically, especially among Black families" and report that from 2019 to 2020, these rates went from "2.8% overall and 1.2% among Black families" in 2019 to an increase of 5.4% overall and 3.3% among Black families in spring 2020, then to 11.1% overall and 16.1% among Black families in fall 2020."

See: Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kids and unlock innovation* (p. 7). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_August2022_FINAL.pdf

12 Gilbert, L.K., Strine, T.W., Szucs, L.E., Crawford, T.N., Parks, S.E., Barradas, D.T., Njai, R. & Ko, J.Y. (2020, December 11). *Racial and ethnic differences in parental attitudes and concerns about school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic-United States, July 2020*. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6949a2.htm

Hill, L. & Artiga, S. (2022, August 22). *COVID-19 cases and deaths by race/ethnicity: Current data and changes over time*. Kaiser Family Foundation. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/covid-19-cases-and-deaths-by-race-ethnicity-current-data-and-changes-over-time/

13 National Public Radio. (2021, December 13). *More Black families are homeschooling their children, citing the pandemic and racism*. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://www.npr.org/2021/12/13/1061787233/more-

black-families-are-homeschooling-their-children-citing-the-pandemic-and-rac

14   For example, the report cites a CNBC clip of the Salman Khan, owner of Khan Academy, simply sharing that "registrations had increased 20 times over"…in the first few months of the pandemic." Yet, the report does not contextualize this with the rest of Khan's comments. In the clip, the reporters asked does "schooling have nothing that can beat it?" Khan responded by saying he thinks for students up to 18 years old, "there's always going to be a very important place for physical schooling" and went on to say "yes, it's nice to learn the algebra, and reading comprehension, but it's also important to get that socialization, have those mentors, to have those extracurricular activities." He also explained that beyond COVID-19, teachers can use online resources such as the Khan Academy to "cater to their [students] individual needs."

See: Pound, J. (2020, April 16). *Khan Academy founder: Balance between in-person, online learning could be 'silver lining' of crisis*. CNBC. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/16/khan-academy-founder-online- learning-could-be-silver-lining-of-crisis.html

15   Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kid and unlock innovation* (p. 5). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_August2022_FINAL.pdf

16   Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kid and unlock innovation* (p. 5). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_August2022_FINAL.pdf

17   National Center for Education Statistics. (2021, August). *Table 302.20. Percentage of recent high school completers enrolled in college, by race/ethnicity: 1960 through 2020*. U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_302.20.asp

National Center for Education Statistics, (2021, October). *Table 326.10. Graduation rate from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, time to completion, sex, control of institution, and percentage of applications accepted: Selected cohort entry years, 1996 through 2014*. Digest of Education Statistics. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_326.10.asp

18   National Center for Education Statistics, (2018, June). *Table 311.40. Percentage of first-year undergraduate students who reported taking remedial education courses, by selected student and institution characteristics: Selected years, 2003-04 through 2015-16*. Digest of Education Statistics. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_311.40.asp

19   Additionally, to imply that parents want to enroll their children outside of their zoned public school, the report shows that 10% of students enroll in private school. Yet this percentage includes Pre-K enrollment, which was 15.2% of private school enrollment in 2019, and the fails to mention that enrollment in private schools has decreased from 11.4% in 1999 to 9.8% in 2019.

20   Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kid and unlock innovation* (pp. 2-3). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_August2022_FINAL.pdf

21   Ishimaru, A.M., Bang, M., Valladares, M.R., Nolan, C.M., Tavares, H., Rajendran, A., Chang, K. (2019). *Recasting families and communities as co-designers of education in tumultuous times*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/family-leadership

22 Squire, J. & Spurrier, A. (2022, August). *Some assembly required: How a more flexible learning ecosystem can better serve all kid and unlock innovation* (p. 14). Bellwether. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/SomeAssemblyRequired_BetaByBellwether_ August2022_FINAL.pdf

23 For instance, research on school closures have shown devasting impacts to the most marginalized communities.

   See: Welton, A.D. & Freelon, R. (2018). Community organizing as educational leadership: Lessons from Chicago on the politics of racial justice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 13*(1), 79-104. Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117744193

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24 Germain, E. (2022). Well-being and equity: A multi-disciplinary framework for rethinking education policy. *Peabody Journal of Education, 97*(1), 6-17 (p. 14). Retrieved October 5, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1080/0 161956X.2022.2026716