Call for Proposals

Improving Education and Reducing Inequality in the United States:
Obtaining New Insights from Population-Based Academic Performance Data

Russell Sage Foundation
William T. Grant Foundation

We seek research projects that deepen our understanding of educational opportunity and success in the United States by using data on academic achievement from the Stanford Education Data Archive constructed by Sean Reardon and colleagues (http://seda.stanford.edu).

New Data
Using data on the results of over 200 million standardized achievement tests taken by roughly 40 million public school students from 2009 to 2013, Reardon and colleagues have constructed data files that provide estimates of the distribution of academic performance on a common scale in every public school district in the United States. Examples of the available statistics include:

1. Mean test scores
    a. By test subject (math and ELA), grade (grades 3-8), and year (2009-2013)
    b. By public school district, county, commuting zone, and metropolitan area
    c. Measured relative to within-state standardized distribution
    d. Measured on a common national scale
2. Measures of the rate of change in average test scores
    a. Within cohorts, across grades
    b. Within grades, across cohorts
    c. By public school district
3. Racial/ethnic achievement gaps
    a. By test subject (math and ELA), grade (grades 3-8), and year (2009-2013)
    b. By public school district, county, commuting zone, and metropolitan area
    c. Measured in pooled within-district standard deviation units
    d. Measured on a common national scale (expected to be available Fall 2016)

Because the data include school district, county, and state identifiers, researchers can link them to any other source of school district data. Applicants are encouraged to submit proposals utilizing this new data resource (in combination with other data sources).

Research Goals
Studies that are able to plausibly identify the *effects* of policies, practices, and conditions on achievement inequality or the effects of achievement gaps on other outcomes and forms of inequality will be preferred over descriptive or correlational studies. We are particularly, though not exclusively, interested in studies aimed at understanding how to reduce inequality (educational inequality or subsequent forms of inequality).

Studies may make use of variation across places (school districts, counties, metropolitan areas,

states), grades (grades 3-8), years (2009-2013), birth cohorts (there are 10 birth cohorts in the data – born roughly 1995-2004), and student subgroups to identify mechanisms that affect inequality. For example, if researchers were able to identify policies and practices that affected certain grades (such as middle school, but not elementary school) or were enacted in specific years (or in different years in different places), such variation might plausibly be used to identify the effects of some policies. If there were policies that affected some birth cohorts (perhaps state pre-school program began in a given year in some states and different years in others), this might produce exogenous variation in access to preschool, the effects of which might be observed by comparing the achievement patters of different cohorts as they progress through school. Finally, policies that differentially affect some schools and/districts but not others (such as school finance policies and changes in such policies, title 1 funding, NCLB waivers or accountability sanctions, federal SIG grants, and so on) may provide a source of exogenous variation that could be used to identify the effects of specific policies on inequality.

Examples of the types of research topics of interest include but are not limited to the following:

1. The effects of federal, state, or district education policies on educational achievement and the reduction of educational inequality (standards, teacher recruitment, retention, and evaluation policies, student assignment and discipline policies, etc.);
2. The effects of residential or school integration on educational achievement and the reduction of educational inequality;
3. The role of school finance and funding in shaping achievement patterns (among states or districts, as well as within-districts);
4. The role of social policies and outside-of-school conditions in reducing inequality (public pre-school, family support policies, after school programming, neighborhood safety and conditions);
5. The role of school choice, charter schools, and other market-based mechanisms in educational outcomes.
6. The effects of achievement patterns and gaps on disparities in college enrollment and completion.
7. The effects of educational achievement and inequality on other social outcomes or aspects of social inequality (such as criminal activity and incarceration, young adult earnings, social mobility, or health).

Research Conference
Researchers who receive awards are expected to present their results at a one-day academic conference in fall 2017. The aims of the conference will be to improve the quality of the research and foster collaboration among early career researchers interested in educational inequality. Grantees will be free to publish their work in their preferred outlet. The Foundation will cover the costs of the conference and reimburse participants for reasonable travel expenses.

Funding
There will be 2 rounds of funding. Accepted proposals will receive up to $20,000 in funding for a faculty project and up to $7,000 for a graduate student project. Applications may be submitted by teams of researchers. The maximum funding for a faculty project will be $20,000. If a graduate student project has multiple students, we will consider funding up to $14,000.

Eligibility
Applicants can be doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows or faculty who received their Ph.D. on or after August 31, 2009. We are particularly interested in promoting racial/ethnic, gender and disciplinary diversity and strongly encourage applications from scholars who are underrepresented in the social sciences.

Application Guidelines
Applicants must submit:
1) a concise (4 pages max.) single-spaced proposal describing their proposed work;
2) a detailed budget (using the RSF template);
3) up-to-date abbreviated CVs (5 pages max.);
4) a fiscal agent letter - a letter from their institution stating that it will act as the fiscal agent for the project should an award be made;
5) graduate students must also submit a letter of recommendation from their faculty advisor.

Applicants are encouraged to explore in detail the available data at http://seda.stanford.edu and to be specific in the proposed analysis, including which data from the project they plan to use and any additional sources of data that will be required.

For detailed information about what can and cannot be included in the budgets, as well as the budget template, please read the RSF Budget Guidelines at: http://www.russellsage.org/how-to-apply/apply-project-awards/budget.

Applications must be emailed to seda@rsage.org. Applications for the first round of funding will be accepted through August 11, 2016 at 2pm Eastern time. Decisions will be announced in early October. We expect to fund 5-7 proposals in each round.

If you still have questions after reviewing the information on our website, please contact Leana Chatrath, Program Officer, at seda@rsage.org.