



THE
REPRESENTATION
PROJECT

THE GREAT

AMERICAN LIE

HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE

CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

EDUCATOR LETTER

DEAR EDUCATORS,


We are thrilled to be able to bring this curriculum for *The Great American Lie* to you. This curriculum is designed to engage your student in critical thinking about the causes and consequences of economic inequality in the U.S.

Students who complete this curriculum will have an understanding of the following:

1. The three primary drivers of economic immobility and inequality in the U.S. (racism; corporate exploitation; gendered societal values);
2. How these three factors work together to produce economic immobility and inequality.
3. Why these conditions exist in U.S. society—who benefits from economic inequality and who is harmed;
4. Why economic mobility and equality are important in a democracy;
5. What policies and cultural practices can improve economic mobility and reduce economic inequality.
6. Actions students can take at the individual, community, and national level to address this issue.

As educators, you play a crucial role in addressing social inequalities by empowering the next generation to take action. We applaud your dedication to making the world a better place, one lesson at a time!

SINCERELY,



Jennifer Siebel Newsom

JENNIFER SIEBEL NEWSOM
FOUNDER



Caroline Heldman

DR. CAROLINE HELDMAN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 **Module #1:** *Is the American Dream a Myth?*
- 5 **Module #2:** *Causes of Economic Inequality*
- 9 **Module #3:** *Racism & Economic Inequality*
- 13 **Module #4:** *Corporate Exploitation & Economic Inequality*
- 18 **Module #5:** *Gendered Values & Economic Inequality*
- 22 **Module #6:** *Learning Empathy*
- 26 **Module #7:** *Taking Action*



MODULE ONE

IS THE AMERICAN DREAM A MYTH?

OVERVIEW

The American Dream is the idea that, if you work hard enough, you can move into a higher social class. It is the belief that upward mobility is possible for everyone, regardless of the class they were born into— that success is due to hard work rather than chance.

Many people imagine the embodiment of the American Dream as a self-made man who pulls himself up by the bootstraps. Americans are more likely than people in other countries to believe that their effort, skill, and intelligence will be rewarded. And groups that have historically been denied opportunities — Black and Latinx Americans — are actually more inclined to believe in the American Dream than other Americans.

A growing body of evidence shows that the American Dream is not a reality for many Americans, that no matter how hard they work, they will not be able to get ahead. About 40% of Americans who are born into poverty stay in poverty, and 140 million Americans are one paycheck away from financial devastation.



EXERCISE ONE

A GROWING GAP

MODULE 1:1

WATCH THE VIDEO AND ANSWER THE QUESTIONS.

As Economist Joseph Stiglitz points out, “America has achieved the dubious distinction of being the most unequal society of any of the advanced countries.”

Why do you think wealth is distributed so unevenly in the United States?

But it hasn't always been this way. The gap between rich and poor has grown much larger since the 1980s. Economist Raj Chetty points out that the earnings of the top 1% have gone up, while the earnings of the middle-class have stagnated and the earnings of the poor have actually fallen.

Why has the gap between the rich and the poor increased so much, starting in the 1980s?

VIDEO CLIP #1: 00.04:40 - 00.05:05



EXERCISE TWO

DREAM VERSUS DESTINY

MODULE 1:2

WATCH THE VIDEO AND ANSWER THE QUESTIONS.

Economic mobility is the ability of a person to improve their economic status. According to Psychologist Niobe Way, “The American Dream is premised on this notion of the individual above all else. We don’t see context. We don’t see culture. We don’t see circumstances... But the reality is that the circumstances are critical to helping them make it.”

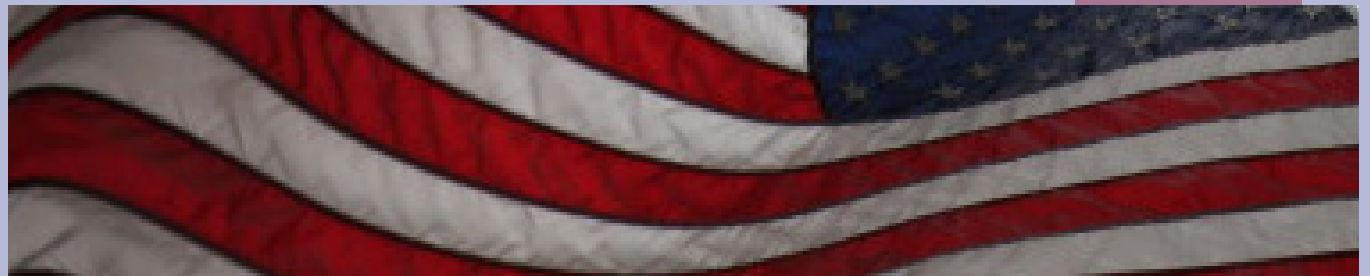
Make a list of circumstances or challenges in a person’s life that could limit their economic mobility. Discuss how it might affect their life.

According to Economist Raj Chetty, “When the family you’re born into determines your destiny, that tears at the fabric of the American Dream.”

Identify circumstances or challenges in your life that have affected your economic mobility.

How are your circumstances similar to or different from your neighbors or classmates?

VIDEO CLIP #2: 00.03:10 - 00.04:40



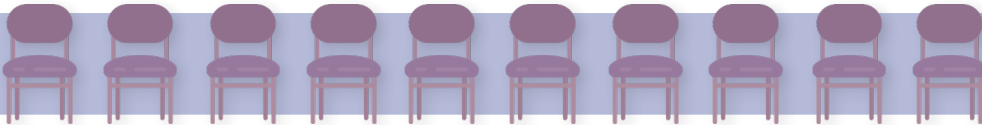
EXERCISE THREE

INEQUALITY CHAIRS

MODULE 1:3

THIS EXERCISE REQUIRES TEN CHAIRS AND TEN VOLUNTEERS.

LINE UP TEN CHAIRS AT THE FRONT OF THE ROOM FACING THE AUDIENCE.



ASK for ten volunteers to line up behind the chairs, one person behind each chair.

EXPLAIN that each person represents 10% of the American population, and each chair represents 10% of private wealth in America.

ASK the audience, “How much wealth do you think the top 10% of the population possesses?”

DIRECT the person representing the top 10% of the population to lie across eight chairs, and direct the other nine people to fit onto the two remaining chairs.

EXPLAIN that this represents the current wealth distribution in America—with the top 10% of Americans possessing 77% of the wealth, and the bottom 90% of Americans possessing 23% of the wealth.

ASK the audience how they feel about this distribution. Then ask them to come up with a distribution they think would be fair.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ORGANIZATION

Inequality.Org for more information about income inequality.

ARTICLE

“U.S. Income Inequality Continues to Grow,” by Carmen Reinicke, *CNBC*.

ARTICLE

“The Gilded Age 2.0: U.S. Income Inequality Increases to Pre-Great Depression Levels,” by Kevin Kelleher, *Fortune*.

ARTICLE

“The Richest 1% Now Owns More of the Country’s Wealth Than Any Time in the Past 50 Years,” by Christopher Ingraham, *The Washington Post*.

ARTICLE

“A Dream Deferred,” by Ron Brownstein, *The Atlantic*.



THANKS FOR USING *THE GREAT AMERICAN LIE* CURRICULUM

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT: THEREPRESENTATIONPROJECT.ORG

