

FROM CITIZENS

TO CONSUMERS

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For better and for worse, the American system of education is truly a marvel. Compared with other countries, public education in the United States has been extraordinarily accessible. It emerged early, expanded quickly, and then rapidly extended access to high school and college. In the process, the United States claimed the distinction of having the first educational system in the world to attain something approaching universal elementary schooling, universal high school attendance, and mass higher education.

But the picture of American education is not all rosy. For one thing, to call it a system at all is something of a contradiction in terms, because it also has the distinction of being radically decentralized, with some 14,000 school districts responsible for setting policy and running schools. And that's before we take into account the large and complex array of public and private colleges in the United States. Even though the educational role of the federal government has been growing in the last several decades, it is still hard to find any structure of education in the world that is more independent of national control. In addition, to applaud the American system of schooling for its great accessibility is to recognize only half the story, since the system balances radical equality of access with radical inequality of outcomes. Students have an easy time gaining entry to education in

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the United States, but—depending on what school they attend, what program they take, and what degree they earn—they have strikingly different educational experiences and gain strikingly different social benefits from their schooling. One other characteristic of the American educational system further dims its luster, and that is the chronically mediocre academic performance of its students. In world comparisons over the last few decades, American elementary and secondary students have consistently scored at a level that is below average.

In short, the American system of education is highly accessible, radically unequal, organizationally fragmented, and instructionally mediocre. In combination, these characteristics have provided a strong and continuing incentive for school reformers to try to change the system, by launching reform movements that would seek to broaden access, reduce inequality, transform governance, and improve learning. But at the same time that these traits have spurred reform efforts, they have also kept reformers from accomplishing their aims.

For example, every effort to expand access for new students at a given level of the system has tended to provoke counter-efforts to preserve the educational advantage of the old students. When high school enrollment began to expand sharply at the start of the twentieth century, the response was to establish curriculum tracking in the high school (with the new students ending up in the lower tracks and the old students in the upper tracks) and to spur the old students to extend their education to the college level. But such efforts by some to preserve educational advantage by extending it to the next-higher level have in turn provoked counter-measures by others to expand access at that level. So by the mid-twentieth century, growing demand for college access brought a flood of new students to higher education. But this just continued the cycle of action and reaction, since the new students largely enrolled in new institutions that were set up to handle the influx—regional state universities and community colleges—while the old

students enrolled at the established higher status institutions and then started attending graduate school in large numbers.

Another impediment to reform is the local autonomy of districts, schools, and classrooms in the American educational system, which has made it hard for reform initiatives to reach the heart of the system where teaching and learning take place, and particularly hard to implement reforms that improve classroom learning. Aggravating this tendency has been one additional characteristic of the system, which is that most educational consumers have shown preference for a school system that provides an edge in the competition for jobs more than for one that enriches academic achievement. We have continually demonstrated interest more in getting a diploma than getting an education.

Undaunted by all these impediments, educational reformers have continually tried to change the school system in order to bring it in line with emerging social goals. In this chapter, I look at the goals that reform movements have projected onto the American school system over the years. Here I'm focusing not on the impact of reform but on its rhetoric. As found in major reform documents, the shifting language of reform shows how the mission of the school system evolved over time, as reformers repeatedly tried to push the system to embrace new goals and refine old ones in an effort to deal with an expanding array of social challenges. After defining the trajectory of reformer wishes for the schools in this chapter, I then look at the depth of reform outcomes for the schools. In chapters 2 and 3 I show how the common school movement created the American school system in the nineteenth century and how the progressive movement sought to transform it at the start of the twentieth century. Then, in succeeding chapters, I examine why the impact of reform movements has only rarely extended beyond the level of rhetoric. But for now my focus is on the way ideas about schools developed across an array of major reform movements in the history of American education.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS OF SCHOOLING FROM CITIZENS TO CONSUMERS

This is a story about the evolving language of educational reform in the United States. It starts in the early nineteenth century with a republican vision of education for civic virtue and ends in the early twenty-first century with a consumerist vision of education for equal opportunity. The story is about how we got from there to here, drawing on major reform texts that span this period. It is also a story about how we developed the ideas about education that laid the groundwork for the American school syndrome.

This rhetorical change consisted of two main shifts, each of which occurred at two levels. First, the overall balance in the purposes of schooling shifted from a political rationale (shoring up the new republic) to a market rationale (promoting social efficiency and social mobility). And the political rationale itself evolved from a substantive vision of education for civic virtue to a procedural vision of education for equal opportunity. Second, in a closely related change, the reform rhetoric shifted from viewing education as a public good to viewing it as a private good. And the understanding of education as a public good itself evolved from a politically grounded definition (education for republican community) to a market-grounded definition (education for human capital).

I explore these changes through an examination of a series of reform documents that represent the major reform movements in the history of American education. These include: Horace Mann's *Fifth and Twelfth Annual Reports* as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Public Education (1841 and 1848), reflecting the common school movement; the *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*, appointed by the National Education Association (1893), a document that served as a foil for the progressive movement; *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, a report of the National Education Association's (NEA)

Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (1918), which laid out the agenda for the dominant strand of the progressive movement; *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (1954), the core text of the desegregation movement; *A Nation at Risk*, report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), which kicked off the standards movement; the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), which made the movement federal law; and two major books from the school choice movement.¹

The evolution of educational rhetoric in the United States fits within a larger, cross-national pattern in the evolving republican conversation about schooling. Republican ideas played a foundational role in the formation of public education in a number of countries during the long nineteenth century, and stretching from the American Revolution to the Great Depression. Although this role varied from one context to another, the republican vision in general called for a system of education that would shape the kind of self-regulating and civic-minded citizen that was needed to sustain a viable republican community. That system was the modern public school. At the heart of its mission was the delicate and critical task of balancing two elements at the core of republican thinking—the autonomous individual and the common good. The primary contribution of the school was its ability to instill a vision of the republic within future citizens in a way that promoted individual choice while inducing them to pursue the public interest of their own free will. This effort posed twin dangers: too much emphasis on individual interests could turn republican community into a pluralist society defined by the competition of private interests; but too much emphasis on community could turn the republic into an authoritarian society that sacrificed individual freedom to collective interests. A liberal republican society requires an educational system that can instill a commitment to both individual liberty and civic virtue.

As I show below, over time the rhetoric of education in the United States shifted from a political vision of a civic-minded

citizen to a market vision of a self-interested consumer. But the idea of republican community did not disappear from the educational mission. Instead the political goal of education shifted from producing civic virtue in the service of the republic to producing human capital and individual opportunity. The end result, however, was to redirect the republican vision of education sharply in the direction of private interests and individual opportunities.

COMPETING SOCIAL GOALS FOR SCHOOLING

A major factor in the transformation of reform rhetoric was the market. While a number of reform efforts—the common school movement, the progressive movement, the civil rights movement, the standards movement, and the school choice movement—occupied center stage in the drama of school reform, the market initially exerted its impact from a position off stage. Over time, however, the market gradually muscled its way into the educational spotlight, shaping both the structure of the school system (by emphasizing inequality and discounting learning) and, more recently, the rhetoric of school reform (by emphasizing job skills and individual opportunity). In the current period, when the market vision has come to drive the educational agenda, the political vision of education's social role remains prominent as an actor in the reform drama, frequently called upon by reformers of all stripes. (I examine here the way the standards and choice movements both belatedly adopted political rhetoric after originally trying to do without it.) But the definition of this political vision has become more abstract, its deployment more adaptable, and its impact more diffuse than in the early nineteenth century, when a well-defined set of republican ideals drove the creation of the American system of common schools.

The American language of educational goals arises from the core tensions within a liberal democracy.² One of those tensions is between the demands of democratic politics and the demands of capitalist markets. A related issue is the requirement that society be able to meet its collective needs while simultaneously

guaranteeing the liberty of individuals to pursue their own interests. In the American setting, these tensions have played out through the politics of education in the form of a struggle among three major social goals for the educational system. One goal is *democratic equality*, which sees education as a mechanism for producing capable citizens. Another is *social efficiency*, which sees education as a mechanism for developing productive workers. A third is *social mobility*, which sees education as a way for individuals to reinforce or improve their social position.

Democratic equality represents the political side of our liberal democratic values, focusing on the role of education in building a nation, forming a republican community, and providing citizens with the wide range of capabilities they need to make decisions in a democracy. The other two goals represent the market side of liberal democracy. Social efficiency captures the perspective of employers and taxpayers, who are concerned about the role of education in producing the job skills required by the modern economy (human capital) and seen as essential for economic growth and general prosperity. From this angle the issue is for education to provide for the full range of productive skills and forms of knowledge required in the complex job structure of modern capitalism. Social mobility captures the perspective of educational consumers and prospective employees, who are concerned about the role of educational credentials in signaling to the market which individuals have the productive skills that qualify them for the jobs with the most power, money, and prestige.

The collectivist side of liberal democracy is expressed by a combination of democratic equality and social efficiency. Both aim to have education provide broad social benefits, and both see education as a public good. Investing in the political capital of citizens and the human capital of workers benefits everyone in society, including those families that do not have children in school. In contrast, the social mobility goal represents the individualist side of liberal democracy. From this perspective, education is a private

good that benefits only the student who receives educational services and owns the resulting diplomas, and its primary function is to provide educational consumers with an edge in the competition for good jobs.

With this mix of goals imposed on it, education in a liberal democracy has come to be an institution at odds with itself. After all, it is being asked simultaneously to serve politics and markets, promote equality and inequality, construct itself and, as a public and private good, serve collective interests and individual interests. Politically, its structure should be flat, its curriculum common, and enrollment universal; economically, its structure should be hierarchical, its curriculum tracked, and enrollment marked by high rates of attrition. From the perspective of democratic equality and social efficiency, its aim is socialization, to provide knowledge that is useful for citizens and workers; from the perspective of social mobility, its aim is selection, to provide credentials that allow access to good jobs, independent of any learning that might have occurred along the way.

These educational goals represent the contradictions embedded in any liberal democracy, contradictions that cannot be resolved without removing either the society's liberalism or its democracy. Therefore, when we project our liberal democratic goals onto schools, we want schools to take each of these goals seriously but not to push any one of them too far, since to do so would put other, equally valued goals in jeopardy. We ask it to promote social equality, but we want it to do so in a way that doesn't threaten individual liberty or private interests. We ask it to promote individual opportunity, but we want it to do so in a way that doesn't threaten the integrity of the nation or the efficiency of the economy. As a result, the educational system is an abject failure in achieving any one of its primary social goals. It is also a failure in solving the social problems assigned to it, since these problems cannot be solved in a way that simultaneously satisfies all three goals. The apparently dysfunctional outcomes

of the school system, therefore, are not necessarily the result of bad planning, bad administration, or bad teaching; they are an expression of the contradictions in the liberal democratic mind.

THE COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT: SCHOOLS FOR THE REPUBLIC

As secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Public Education in the 1840s, Horace Mann became the most effective champion of the American common school movement, which established the American public school system in the years before the Civil War. As we will see in the following chapter, its primary accomplishment was not in increasing literacy, which was already widespread in the United States, but in drawing public support for a publicly funded and publicly controlled system of schooling that served all the members of the community.

Mann's *Twelfth Annual Report*, published in 1848, provides the most comprehensive summary of the argument for the common schools. In it he made clear that the primary rationale for this institution was political: to create citizens with the knowledge, skills, and public spirit required to maintain a republic and to protect it from the sources of faction, class, and self-interest that pose the primary threat to its existence. After exploring the dangers that the rapidly expanding market economy posed to the fabric of republican community by introducing class conflict, he proclaimed:

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery. . . . The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society.³

A few pages later, he summed up his argument with the famous statement, “It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is

a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion.”⁴ In his view, then, schools were given the centrally important political task of making citizens for a republic. All other functions were subordinate to this one.

In the political rhetoric of the common school movement, we can also see some other themes with a more economic flavor that will become the centerpiece of later reform movements. One is the importance of education in reducing social differences by enhancing social opportunities for all, as shown in the passage above. Another is the value of education as an investment in human capital. Mann devoted part of his *Fifth Annual Report* (issued in 1841) to the latter issue, where he drew on his survey of manufacturers to demonstrate that, “If it can be proved that the aggregate wealth of a town will be increased just in proportion to the increase of its appropriations for schools, the opponents of such a measure will be silenced. The tax for this purpose, which they now look upon as a burden, they will then regard as a profitable investment.”⁵

Yet his defense of the human capital rationale for schooling is backhanded at best. He was a little embarrassed to be talking about the crass economic returns on education, as he explained in his introduction to this discussion: “This view, so far from being the highest which can be taken of the beneficent influences of education, may, perhaps, be justly regarded as the lowest. But it is a palpable view.”⁶ Thus economic arguments are useful in drawing needed support to the common schools, but they play merely a supporting role in the “higher and nobler” mission of supporting republican community. Only in the twentieth century would such economic arguments take center stage.

EMERGING CONSUMERISM: SCHOOLS FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY

If Horace Mann and the other leaders of the common school movement were reluctant to portray education as a way to promote

worldly gain, the students and parents who pursued education were less so. Compelled by the need to survive and the ambition to thrive in a market economy, citizens quickly began to think of education as something more than a politically desirable way to preserve the republic; they also saw it as a way to get ahead in society. As we will see in the next chapter, reading, writing, and the manipulation of numbers were essential for anyone who wanted to function effectively in the commercial life of the colonial and early national periods of American history. Individuals did not need republican theory or compulsory schooling laws to make them pick up these skills, which is one reason why literacy was a precursor rather than an outcome of the common school movement in the United States.

But this compelling rationale for education—schooling for social mobility—was not something that appeared prominently in the rhetoric of school reform until well into the twentieth century. One reason for this silence was that the idea of education as a way to get ahead was a matter of common sense in a society that was founded in market relations. It was not the subject of reform rhetoric because this idea was already widely accepted. Another reason was that people felt a bit embarrassed about voicing such a self-interested motive for education in the face of the selfless religious and political rationales for education that dominated public discussion in the American colonies and the early United States. But the absence of such talk did not belie the reality that commercial motives for schooling were strong.

This relative silence about an important factor shaping education resonates with an important paradox in the history of school reform identified by David Tyack and Larry Cuban, in their book *Tinkering toward Utopia*.⁷ Reform rhetoric swirls around the surface of schools, making a lot of noise but not necessarily penetrating below the surface; while evolutionary forces of structural change may be proceeding powerfully but slowly outside of view, making substantial changes over time without ever necessarily being verbalized or becoming part of a reform agenda.

The story I am telling in this chapter is about the interaction between these two levels—the changing rhetoric of educational reform in the United States over the past two hundred years and its relationship with the quiet but increasingly potent impact of market forces on American schools. I suggest that the rhetorical shifts in subsequent school reform movements were attempts to reach an accommodation between economy and society through the institution of education, which turned increasingly critical as education itself became more economically useful to both employers and employees in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In *The Making of an American High School*,⁸ I explored the way in which educational consumerism emerged as an unintended consequence of the invention of the public high school in the nineteenth century. Central High School was founded in Philadelphia in 1838 for the most whiggish of reasons. Its founders liked to call it “the school of the republic,” and they saw it as an effective way to encourage middle-class families to send their children to the new common schools, thus making these schools a true embodiment of republican community. But in order to make the high school sufficiently attractive to draw (male) students from the best private schools, they inadvertently created a highly marketable commodity—with a marble facade, the latest scientific equipment, and a faculty of distinguished professors—which became the object of intense competition among educational consumers.

The new high school introduced a form of educational distinction that was highly visible (Central was the only school of its kind in a large city), culturally legitimate (it was open to anyone who could meet its academic standards), and scarce (it offered a degree to only one in a hundred of the students entering the school system). These characteristics made a Central diploma quite valuable as a way for students to distinguish themselves from peers, even though at the time the job market was not exerting demand for the skills acquired in a secondary education. But by the 1890s, when growing clerical and managerial jobs created

a market for high school graduates, the enormous political demand for access forced the school system to expand from two high schools (Central and its female counterpart) to a whole system of community high schools throughout the city. The newcomers ended up in the lower tracks of the newly expanded high school while the students from the high school's older, middle-class constituency ended up in the upper tracks, which helped accommodate both access and advantage in the same school. The resulting institution—the tracked comprehensive high school—served as the model for secondary education for the next one hundred years.

COMMITTEE OF TEN: COMMONALITY WITHOUT CITIZENSHIP

In 1893, at the same time that consumer pressure was starting to transform secondary education in Philadelphia and elsewhere, a committee proposed to the National Educational Association (NEA) a new structure for the high school curriculum. The Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies was made up of six professors, three high school principals, and the U.S. Commissioner of Education; Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, served as chair. The committee's report is interesting less for its impact, which was minimal, than for its iconic status in later educational debates. It occupied a transitional position, as the final attenuated expression of the common school movement, poised to be swept away by the emerging progressive movement. The progressives dismissed the report with scorn, calling it the last gasp of a discredited vision of traditional academic schooling pushed on the schools by a group of self-interested college professors. Contemporary critics of progressivism—like Diane Ravitch, David Angus, and Jeffrey Mirel⁹—see the report as the road not taken, which would have saved us from the ravages of progressive reform and which in some ways was resurrected and reaffirmed by the standards movement in the late twentieth century.

For our purposes, I will focus on what is usually seen as the main issue in a very long report, the committee's insistence that the high school curriculum should be quite similar in length and content for all students, whether or not they were heading to college. There is much about this argument that is resonant with the common school reformers, but the rhetorical representation of the argument is markedly different. The report stated that "every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease."¹⁰

This proposal would have resonated with Horace Mann and the other members of the common school movement, since it would preserve the republican practice of education as an experience shared by the whole community. Schooling should supply citizens with a common set of abilities they need to engage in political life, and it should offset the differentiating tendencies in the market economy with an emphasis on building republican community. Both argue for a common curriculum. But as we have seen, in Philadelphia and elsewhere, the market was driving the high school curriculum in the other direction, differentiating curriculum choices and school experiences according to a student's class background and future prospects. In many ways this report can be read—as Ravitch, Angus, and Mirel do—as a cry for preserving a common education at just the point that the institution was moving sharply toward class-based tracking.

But what a muted cry it was. Gone is the grandiloquent language of Horace Mann, the appeals to the high-level political values, the passionate vision of education as the savior of society. In a report of nearly 19,000 words, there is not a single use of terms like "citizen," "republic," or "democracy." Replacing republican rhetoric is the cautious, circumscribed, bureaucratic language of a committee of professional educators. In the fifty years since Horace Mann wrote, the common school system he promoted

had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. It had become the standard model for American education, defining what future generations would come to see as the “grammar of schooling.”¹¹ It had expanded from elementary to grammar to high school. And it had generated a professional corps of teachers and administrators and college professors who saw their work as a professional practice rather than a political vocation.

And so the committee used a coolly professional rhetoric, narrowly confined to the issues at hand, sticking strictly to the business of schooling. This made the report appropriate to its audience of educators in the NEA, but it left the committee’s proposals without a solid political grounding in the surrounding society. If it is not for the benefit of building republican community, then why should high schools have a core curriculum? The report does not really answer this question, except for a feeble wave in the direction of efficiency: “The principle laid down by the Conferences will, if logically carried out, make a great simplification in secondary school programmes.”¹² In the absence of solid grounding, the committee allowed the progressives to attribute its recommendations to a conservative desire to preserve traditional school subjects and to impose the requirements of an antiquated college curriculum on the modern high school.

ADMINISTRATIVE PROGRESSIVISM: SCHOOLS FOR SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

The progressive education movement burst on the scene in the United States at the start of the twentieth century. It was a complex movement with a wide range of actors and tendencies embedded within it, but two main strands in particular stand out. Child-centered progressives (such as John Dewey and William Kilpatrick) focused on teaching and learning in classrooms, advocating child-centered pedagogy, discovery learning, and student engagement. Administrative progressives (such as Edward Thorndike, Ellwood Cubberley, and David Snedden) focused on

the structure of school governance and curriculum, advocating a mission of social efficiency for schools, which meant preparing students for their future social roles. I focus on administrative progressivism here for the simple reason that they won and the pedagogues lost in the competition over exerting an impact on American schools.¹³

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (chaired by Clarence Kingsley) issued a report to the NEA titled *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, which spelled out the administrative progressive position on education more clearly and consequentially than any other single document. The report announces at the very beginning that secondary schools need to change in response to changes in society, which “call for a degree of intelligence and efficiency on the part of every citizen that can not be secured through elementary education alone, or even through secondary education unless the scope of that education is broadened.”¹⁴ According to the authors, schools exist to help individuals adapt to the needs of society; as society becomes more complex, schools must transform themselves accordingly; and in this way they will help citizens develop the socially needed qualities of “intelligence and efficiency.”

This focus on social efficiency, however, didn't deter the authors from drawing on political rhetoric to support their position. In fact, perhaps reacting to the Committee of Ten, or learning from its failure to have a lasting impact on schooling, the authors framed this report in explicitly political terms. In a 12,000-word report, they used the terms “democracy” or “democratic” no fewer than 40 times, an average of 1.5 usages per page; the terms “citizen” or “citizenship” appear 16 times. (The words “republic” and “republican” are nowhere to be found.)

What do they mean by democratic education? At one point, in bold-faced type, they state that “education in a democracy, both within and without the school, should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he

will find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends.”¹⁵ So democracy is about organizing individuals for the benefit of society, and education is about readying individuals to assume their proper place in that society. This is as crisp a definition as you can find for socially efficient education.

The commission follows up on this statement of principles to spell out the implications for the high school curriculum: “This commission, therefore, regards the following as the main objectives of education: 1. Health. 2. Command of fundamental processes. 3. Worthy home membership. 4. Vocation. 5. Citizenship. 6. Worthy use of leisure. 7. Ethical character.”¹⁶ What a striking array of goals for education this is. In comparison with Horace Mann’s grand vision of schooling for the republic, we have a list of useful functions that schools can serve for society, only one of which focuses on citizenship. Furthermore, this list confines the rich array of liberal arts subjects, which constituted the entire curriculum proposed by the Committee of Ten, to a single category; the authors give it the dumbed-down and dismissive title, “command of fundamental processes”; and they assign it a parallel position with such mundane educational objectives as “worthy home membership” and “worthy use of leisure.”

Later in the report, the commission spelled out an important implication of their vision of secondary education. Not only must the curriculum be expanded radically beyond the academic confines of the Committee of Ten’s vision, but it must also be sharply differentiated if it is going to meet the needs of a differentiated job structure:

The work of the senior high school should be organized into differentiated curriculums. . . . The basis of differentiation should be, in the broad sense of the term, vocational, thus justifying the names commonly given, such as agricultural, business, clerical, industrial, fine-arts, and household-arts curriculums. Provision should be made also for those having distinctively academic interests and needs.¹⁷

The commissioners are explaining that their call for a socially efficient education in practice means vocationalism, with the vocational skills required by the job market driving the curriculum and slicing it into segments based on the specific jobs toward which students are heading. Any leftover space in the curriculum could then be used for “those having distinctively academic interests and needs.”

This report, the keystone of the administrative progressive movement, represents two major transformations in the rhetoric of the common school movement. First, whereas Mann’s reports used economic arguments to support a primarily political purpose for schooling (preparing citizens with civic virtue), the Commission’s report turned this upside down, using political arguments about the requirements of democracy to support a vision of schooling that was primarily economic (preparing efficient workers). The politics of the *Cardinal Principles* thus provides a thin democratic veneer on a structure of socially efficient education, dressing up what would otherwise be a starkly utilitarian vision.

Second, in *Cardinal Principles* the administrative progressives preserved the common school movement’s understanding of education as a public good. There is no talk in the report about education as a kind of personal property, which offers selective benefits to the credential holder; instead, the emphasis is relentlessly on the collective benefits of education to society. What is new, however, is this: Whereas the common school men defined education as a public good in political terms, the progressives defined it a public good in economic terms. Yes, education serves the interests of society as a whole, said these progressives; but it does so not by producing civic virtue but by producing human capital.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: SCHOOLS FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

If the administrative progressive movement marginalized the political argument for education, using it as window-dressing for

a vision of education as a way to create productive workers, the civil rights movement brought politics back to the center of the debate about schools. In the 1954 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*,¹⁸ Chief Justice Earl Warren, speaking for a unanimous Court, made a forceful political argument for the need to desegregate American schools. The question he was addressing was whether to overturn the Court's doctrine of "separate but equal," established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1894, as a violation of the clause in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (passed at the end of the Civil War) that guaranteed all citizens the "equal protection of the laws." In past cases, the Court was able to duck the question by ordering school systems to equalize the funding of black and white schools. But in this case, "the Negro and white schools involved have been equalized, or are being equalized, with respect to buildings, curricula, qualifications and salaries of teachers, and other 'tangible' factors," which forced the Court to address the central issue: "We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does."

The Court's reasoning moved through two main steps in reaching this conclusion. First, Warren argued that the social meaning of education had changed dramatically in the ninety years since the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the years after the Civil War, "The curriculum was usually rudimentary; ungraded schools were common in rural areas; the school term was but three months a year in many states, and compulsory school attendance was virtually unknown." As a result, education was not seen as an essential right of any citizen; but that had now changed.

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and

the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

This led to the second part of the argument. If education “is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms,” then the question was whether segregated education could be seen as providing truly equal educational opportunity for black and white students. Here Warren drew on social science research to argue that “To separate [black students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” He continued by quoting from a finding by a lower court in the case: “Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.”

In combination, these two arguments—education is an essential right and segregated education is inherently harmful—led Warren to his conclusion: “We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs . . . are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.”

The argument in this decision was at heart political, asserting that education is a constitutional right of every citizen that must be granted to everyone on equal terms. In this sense, it was a striking change from the *Cardinal Principles* report, which used the words “democracy” and “citizenship” to support an argument that was at heart economic. But note that the political vision in *Brown* is quite different from the political vision put forward by Mann. For the common school movement, schools were critically important in the effort to build a republic; their purpose was political. But for the desegregation movement, schools were critically important as a mechanism of social opportunity. Their purpose was to promote social mobility. Politics was just the means by which one could demand access to this attractive educational commodity. In this sense, then, *Brown* depicted education as a private good, whose benefits go to the degree holder and not to society as a whole. The Court’s argument was not that granting access to equal education for blacks would enhance society, both black and white; instead, it argued that blacks were suffering from segregation and would benefit from desegregation. Quality education was an important form of property that they had been denied, and the remedy was to give them access to it.

Note the language of the decision: “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.” Schools enable individuals to succeed in life, and politically we cannot deny them this opportunity. This is an argument that shows how much schools had come of age more than one hundred years after Horace Mann. Once created to support the republic, in a time when schools were marginal to the practical business of making a living, they had become central to every citizen’s ability to get a good job and get ahead socially. In the process, however, the political vision of education has changed from a substantive focus on producing the citizens needed to sustain the republic to a procedural focus on providing social opportunities. The idea of

education as opportunity was already visible in Mann, but it was subordinated to the political project; here educational opportunity has become the project, and politics has become the way to assert your right to it.

THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT 1.0: SOCIAL EFFICIENCY AND COMMONALITY

In 1983, the National Commission for Excellence in Education produced a report titled *A Nation at Risk*, which helped turn the emerging standards effort into a national reform movement. It is useful to think of this movement in relation to its predecessors, both in the way it drew from them and the way it reacted against them. From the Committee of Ten the standards movement drew the idea of a core academic curriculum for all students, which in turn stood as a harsh rebuke to the diffuse, differentiated, and nonacademic curriculum posed by *Cardinal Principles*; yet *A Nation at Risk* also shows a clear affinity with *Cardinal Principles* by defining the primary purpose of education as social efficiency. At the same time, the standards movement's emphasis on academic content and learning outcomes served as a counter to the civil rights movement, which focused primarily on access to educational opportunity rather than on the substance of learning; and its stress on education as a public good contrasted with *Brown's* emphasis on education as a form of individual benefit.

The report got off to a fast start, issuing a dire warning about how bad things were and how important it was to reform the educational system.

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . . We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide

of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.¹⁹

This passage set the tone for the rest of the report. It asserted a vision of education as an intensely public good: All Americans benefit from its successes, and all are threatened by its failures. The nation is at risk. This was in striking contrast with the vision of education in the *Brown* decision, which depicted education as a private good, one that was critically important to the possibility of social success for every individual. In that view, it was black educational consumers who were at risk from segregation, not the nation.

But the report represented education as a particular type of public good, which benefited American society by giving it the human capital it needed in order to be economically competitive with other nations.

We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.²⁰

The risk to the nation posed here was primarily economic, and the main role that education could play in alleviating this risk was to develop a more efficient mechanism for turning students into productive workers. In parallel with the argument in *Cardinal Principles*, *A Nation at Risk* asserted that the issue of wealth production—which Horace Mann saw as one of the “inferior motives” for supporting public education—was the most important motive in seeking higher educational standards.

The report's first three recommendations spelled out the core substance of the changes at the top of the priority list for the standards movement. Under the heading “Content,” the commission recommended “that State and local high school graduation

requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics,” which included three to four years of English, math, science, and social studies, plus some work in computer science.²¹ Under the heading “Standards and Expectations,” the commission recommended “more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student content.” In particular, this meant that “Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work.”²² Under the heading “Time,” the commission recommended “that significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year.”²³

In stressing the need to refocus attention on a core academic curriculum for all students, *A Nation at Risk* stood as a rebuke to the differentiated and vocationalized curriculum of the *Cardinal Principles* and a bow in the direction of the Committee of Ten, but it embraced the *Principles*’ vision of education for social efficiency. It used a modest form of political rhetoric to support the standards effort (using some version of “citizen” eighteen times and “democracy” two times in a nearly 18,000-word report, and including one quote from Jefferson), but the emphasis here was on education as a way to produce the human capital rather than *Brown*’s emphasis on education as a way to promote individual opportunity. And by focusing on student learning rather than student access, it also represented a turn away from the equal opportunity concerns of the *Brown* decision.

SCHOOL CHOICE MOVEMENT 1.0: CONSUMERISM AND SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

The school choice movement had its roots in Milton Friedman, who devoted a chapter to the subject in his 1962 book, *Capitalism*

and Freedom. But the movement really took off as a significant reform effort in the 1990s, and a major text that shaped the policy discourse of these movement was a book by John Chubb and Terry Moe—*Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*—which was published by the Brookings Institution in 1990. The argument they raised in favor of school choice consisted of two key elements. First, they used the scholarly literature on school effectiveness to argue that schools are most effective at promoting student learning if they have the greatest degree of autonomy in administration, teaching, and curriculum. Second, they argued that democratic governance of school systems necessarily leads to bureaucratic control of schools, which radically limits autonomy; whereas market-based governance, based on empowering educational consumers instead of empowering the state, leads to more school autonomy. As a result, they concluded, we need to shift from democratic to market control of schooling in order to make schools more educationally effective.

Like the standards movement, the choice movement inverted the rhetorical priorities of the common school movement, putting markets before politics. But the approach was more radically pro-market than the one proposed in *A Nation at Risk*, because Chubb and Moe argued that democratic politics was in fact the reason that schools performed badly, and the remedy was to remove schools from democratic control and hand them over to educational consumers: “Our guiding principle in the design of a choice system is this: public authority must be put to use in creating a system that is almost entirely beyond the reach of public authority.”²⁴ Markets, they argued, are simply more efficient at promoting the school autonomy needed for effective teaching and learning: “In a market setting, then, there are strong forces at work—arising from the technical, administrative, and consumer-satisfaction requirements of organizational success—that promote school autonomy.” By contrast, “In the public sector, the institutional forces work in the opposite direction. The raison

d'être of democratic control is to impose higher order values on schools, and thus limit their autonomy."²⁵

The authors welcomed the fact that, by shifting control from a democratic polity to the educational consumer, the proposed school choice system would change education from a public good to a private good.

Under a system of democratic control, the public schools are governed by an enormous, far-flung constituency in which the interests of parents and students carry no special status or weight. When markets prevail, parents and students are thrust onto center stage, along with the owners and staff of schools; most of the rest of society plays a distinctly secondary role, limited for the most part to setting the framework within which educational choices get made.²⁶

In this way, then, the rhetoric of the school choice movement at the close of the twentieth century represented the opposite end of the scale from the rhetoric of the common school movement that set in motion the American public school system in the middle of the nineteenth century. In educational reform rhetoric, we have moved all the way from a political rationale for education to a market rationale, and from seeing education as a public good to seeing it as a private good. Instead of extolling the benefits of having a common school system promote a single, virtuous republican community, reformers were extolling the benefits of having an atomized school system serve the differential needs of a vast array of disparate consumer subcultures.

STANDARDS 2.0: BROADENING THE BASE WITH A POLITICAL APPEAL TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

The start of the twenty-first century saw an interesting shift in the rhetoric of the standards movement and the choice movement, as both incorporated the language of equal opportunity from the civil rights movement. Whether these changes represented a change of heart or merely change of strategy is beyond

the scope of my discussion here. My focus in this chapter is on the changing rhetoric of reform, and in both cases the change helped broaden the appeal of the reform effort by expanding the reasons for joining the movement. In their original form, both movements ran into significant limitations in their ability to draw support, and both turned to a very effective political argument from the civil rights movement to add passion and breadth to their mode of appeal.

A Nation at Risk made a strong case for supporting educational standards and accountability on the grounds of social efficiency. Although this approach was necessary and effective in encouraging governors and legislators to pass enabling legislation at the state level (by asserting that schooling is a sound public investment), it was not sufficient to gain the support of Congress and the general public for a national standards initiative. Talking about education as an investment in human capital made the reform sound sensible and prudent as a matter of social policy, but it was difficult to get people excited about this effort. Not for nothing is economics known as the dismal science, and the economic rationale for education was not very inspiring at the grassroots level.

In addition, by assigning schools the task of increasing the stock of human capital, the standards movement was treating schooling as a public good, and like any other public good, this left education with what economists call a free-rider problem. Since we all gain benefits from a public good (like public safety or clean air) whether or not we directly contribute to it, it is difficult to maintain such goods on a voluntary basis. Individuals may choose to invest in a variety of other projects that bring them a direct personal return as long as they can get a free ride on the collective benefits of schooling.

One way to gain support for a public good is through a universal mandate such as taxation; another is to appeal for support on idealistic grounds. For educational reformers a political appeal can help turn free riders into active supporters, but *A Nation*

at Risk made a political appeal in a manner that was limited and not terribly effective. Its main approach was to depict the consequences of educational failure as a threat to the viability of the United States as a nation in global competition; thus the apocalyptic language in the report's opening passages. However, the threats posed by "the rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" would have felt rather remote to the average citizen and congressperson. Both the first President Bush and President Clinton used this strategy in trying to launch a national standards policy, and both failed. However, in January 2002, the second President Bush signed into law a wide-reaching piece of standards legislation passed with broad bipartisan support.

The title of this law explains the rhetorical shift involved in gaining approval for it: The No Child Left Behind Act.²⁷ Listen to the language in the opening section of this act, which constitutes the most powerful accomplishment of the school standards movement: "The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments." This end would be accomplished by aligning education "with challenging State academic standards," "meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation's highest-poverty schools," "closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children," "holding schools accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students," "targeting . . . schools where needs are greatest," and "using State assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging State academic achievement and content standards."

What we find here is a marriage of the standards movement and the civil rights movement. From the former comes the focus on rigorous academic subjects, core curriculum for all students, and testing and accountability; from the latter comes the urgent

call to reduce social inequality by increasing educational opportunity. The opening sentence captures both elements succinctly.

CHOICE 2.0: A PARALLEL APPEAL TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

The school choice movement had a rhetorical problem that was similar in some ways and different in other ways from the one facing the standards movement, but the message of equal opportunity worked just as well for choice reformers as it did for standards reformers. What was similar about the choice problem was the difficulty in selling choice as an exercise in efficiency. Chubb and Moe stressed that market-based schools are more effective than politics-based schools, but effectiveness alone is not the kind of issue that mobilizes citizens to support a major change in the way schools are structured. That is particularly the case for the choice movement, since the proposed transformation was such a radical departure from the time-honored pattern of school governance established in the common school era. Standards reformers were tinkering with curriculum and tests; choice reformers were attacking the democratic control of schools. It is hard to win a political fight in the United States if you cede the pro-democracy position to your opponents. Compounding the problem was the possibility that market-based schooling would intensify social inequality by allowing schools to segregate themselves along lines of class and race in response to consumer preferences. If the possible benefits were defined only as greater school effectiveness and the possible costs were defined as a retreat from democracy and equality, then the battle for school choice looked hopeless. A series of ballot failures in proposals for school vouchers seemed to confirm this judgment.

In the late 1990s, however, the politics of school choice became more complex with the introduction of a new approach to the choice movement's rhetorical repertoire. There is no canonical

source to draw from in exploring this change; instead, it was a rhetorical shift that spread widely throughout the movement. As one possible example among many, I use a book by Julian Betts and Tom Loveless, *Getting Choice Right*, published in 2005 by Brookings, which also published the book by Chubb and Moe. The essence of the shift in emphasis from the earlier book was captured in the new book's subtitle: "Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Educational Policy." Adding equity changed the valence of the choice argument. Instead of being seen as a threat to social equality, choice now could be presented as a way to spread social opportunity to the disadvantaged.

At the start of their book, Betts and Loveless agree with the judgment that "school choice in the United States is here to stay and likely to grow."²⁸ The only issue is how to implement it effectively.

Indeed, the question of school choice is not an "if" or a "when." We have always had school choice in the United States, through the right of parents to send their child to a private school and through the ability of parents to pick a public school for their child by choosing where to live. Clearly, affluent parents have typically been the main beneficiaries of these forms of school choice.

In recent decades new forms of school choice have arisen that have fundamentally changed the education landscape. In many cases these new mechanisms have provided less affluent families with their first taste of school choice.²⁹

This shift toward a rhetoric of equal opportunity dramatically changed the way the choice argument was received, and also it transformed the political complexion of the effort. Once favored primarily by libertarians, economists, and free-market Republicans, it was now able to pick up support from a variety of sectors. One major supporter was Howard Fuller, a black community leader and former Milwaukee school superintendent, who headed the pro-choice organization Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). He argued that

We must give low-income and working-class parents the power to choose schools—public or private, nonsectarian or religious—where their children will succeed. And we must give all schools the incentives to work to meet children's needs. Consider the power of choice in the hands of families who have little or no power because they control no resources. Consider how the absence of choice will continue to consign their children to schools that the affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children.³⁰

With the new political turn, even Marxist economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis came to argue that school choice could enhance social equity.³¹ Adding equal opportunity to the argument helped broaden the appeal of both the standards and choice movements.

CONCLUSION

This has been a story about the changing rhetoric of American school reform. We have seen a transition from a political vision to a market vision of schooling; from a focus on schooling as a way to create citizens for an emerging republic to a focus on schooling as a way to allow citizens to get ahead in a market society. During this century and a half, however, we have not seen the political argument for schooling disappear. Instead, we have seen it become transformed from the argument that schooling promotes civic virtue among citizens to the argument that schooling promotes social mobility among consumers. In the latter form, the political vision of schooling has retained a strong rhetorical presence in the language of school reform.

Yet the persistence of a political argument for schooling has come at a cost. Gone is the notion that schools exist to promote civic virtue for the preservation of republican community; in its place is the notion that schools exist to give all consumers access to a valuable form of educational property. This is a political vision of a very different sort, which transforms education from a public good to a private good, and from a source of political

community to a source of individual opportunity. As we will see in later chapters, by undermining education as a public good and empowering educational consumers, this evolved vision of the American school system provides the rationale for the current school syndrome.

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