

## INTRODUCTION

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We Americans have long pinned our hopes on education. It's the main way we try to express our ideals and solve our problems. We want schools to provide us with good citizens and productive workers; to give us opportunity and reduce inequality; to improve our health, reduce crime, and protect the environment. So we assign these social missions to schools, and educators gamely agree to carry them out. When the school system inevitably fails to produce the desired results, we ask reformers to fix it. The result, as one pair of scholars has put it, is that school reform in the United States is "steady work." The system never seems to work the way we want it to, but we never give up hope that one day it will succeed if we just keep tinkering.<sup>1</sup>

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This book is an attempt to explain how this system came about, how it works (and doesn't work), and why we keep investing so heavily in it even though it continues to disappoint us. At heart, this is a story grounded in paradox. The education enterprise is arguably the greatest institutional success in American history. It grew from a modest and marginal position in the eighteenth century to the very center of American life in the twenty-first, where it consumes a stunning share of the time and treasure of both governments and citizens. Key to its institutional success has been its ability to embrace and embody the social goals that we have imposed on it. Yet in spite of recurring waves of school

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reform, schooling in the United States has been unable to realize these goals.

When people continually repeat behaviors that turn out badly for them, we consider it a sign of mental illness. In this sense, then, the American tendency to resort to schooling is less a strategy than a syndrome. We have set up our school system for failure by asking it to fix all of our most pressing social problems, which we are unwilling to address more directly through political action rather than educational gesture. When it fails, we fiddle with the system and try again. Both as a society and as individuals, we continue to vest our greatest hopes in an institution that is clearly unsuited to realizing them.

The system's failure is, in part, the result of a tension between our shifting social aims for education and the system's own organizational inertia. We created the system to solve critical social problems in the early days of the American republic, and its success in dealing with these problems fooled us into thinking that as time passed we could redirect the system toward new problems. But the school system has picked up substantial momentum over the years, which makes it hard for us to turn it in a new direction.

The system's failure, however, is largely the result of another tension, between our social goals and our personal hopes. School reformers have acted as the agents for society, seeking to use schools to create capable citizens and productive workers and to cure our social ills. Since their initial success early in the nineteenth century, however, these reformers have been mostly unable to achieve these goals through schools. In contrast to reformers, individual consumers of education have seen schools less as a way to pursue grand social designs than as a way to pursue intensely personal dreams of a good job and a good life. As we will see, compared with school reformers, consumers have had a much stronger impact in shaping both school and society; but in the process they have pushed the system in contradictory directions because they want sharply different benefits from it.

Throughout the history of American education, some consumers have demanded greater access to school in order to climb the social ladder, while others have demanded greater advantage from school in order to protect themselves from these same social climbers. Obligingly, the school system has let us have it both ways, providing access *and* advantage, promoting equality *and* inequality.

A key to understanding the American school syndrome is to recognize that our schools have never really been about learning. The impact of school on society over the years has come more from the form of the school system than from the substance of the school curriculum. Schools have been able to create community by bringing together a diverse array of citizens under one roof and exposing them to a shared social and cultural experience, but for these purposes the content of the curriculum hasn't mattered as much as its commonality. In the country's early days, schools helped create citizens for the republic, and more recently they have helped assimilate immigrants. But in many ways the school system's greatest social impact has come from its power to allocate social access and social advantage. And this was more the result of which students entered school and which graduated from it than of what they learned in between.

### **A LITTLE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: WAVES OF SCHOOL REFORM IN THE UNITED STATES**

The best way to understand the school syndrome is first to explore where the American school system came from and then examine how it works. So let me give a brief outline of the major social movements that tried to establish and reform the system. This will serve as a map to help the reader follow the historical discussion of schooling in the first three chapters and as background for the analysis of the present-day school system that I develop in the rest of the book.

The first educational reform effort in the United States was the common school movement in the early and mid-nineteenth

century. This was a strikingly successful effort by Whig reformers to resolve a crisis that nearly overwhelmed the United States during its early years. The problem was that the republic was new and fragile, fighting to overcome a two-thousand-year history whose clear moral was that republics don't last. In the 1820s and 1830s, American society faced a rapidly growing market economy, which brought great wealth and opportunity but also threatened two elements that were critical to keeping the republic intact—a rough equality of conditions among citizens and a strong culture of civic commitment. By creating a publicly funded and controlled system of public schools that drew together everyone in the community, the common school movement played a critical role in the larger process of institution-building during this period, helping to preserve the republic without putting a damper on economic growth. The invention of the public school system was part of a grand compromise between democratic politics and capitalist markets that has proven essential for the durability of the United States as a liberal democracy. In the process of accomplishing this grand compromise, the common school movement established the basic organizational structure and political rationale for the public school system, both of which have endured to the present day.

The second major reform movement in the history of American education was the progressive movement, which spanned the first half of the twentieth century. The progressive movement in education was something of a catchall, which encompassed a wide variety of individual elements. But the movement had a few core orientations that justified the common label. In loose conjunction with the larger progressive political movement, all of the factions of educational progressivism were reacting to the social and political crisis of the early twentieth century. This crisis was less fundamental and threatening to American society than the one that faced the Whig reformers in the common school movement. The government was secure and the old liberal democratic bargain still held. But the problem was to find a way for

government and society to manage the new environment, which included a new corporate economy, growing inequality, angry labor relations, rapid growth of cities, and a huge wave of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

Educational progressives came up with two related responses. What they had in common was a hostility toward the traditional academic curriculum, a focus on adapting education to the developmental needs and individual abilities of students, a concern for accommodating the influx of immigrants to the United States, and a need to reconfigure secondary education in order to deal with the flood of new students entering the country's rapidly expanding high schools. One strand of this movement was the child-centered progressives, led by John Dewey and his followers. The other was the administrative progressives, led by a large group of professional educators. As I will show, the administrative progressives were by far the most effective group in changing the structure of secondary education in the United States, but despite their best efforts over fifty years, even they were not able to overturn the core patterns of teaching and learning in American classrooms.

In the last fifty years, we have seen a series of efforts to reform American education. First was the desegregation movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which gradually grew into a broad movement for making American schools inclusive. It ended legal segregation by race, and it also worked to reduce the barriers between girls and boys and between the able and the disabled in American schools. Second was the school standards movement, which began in the 1980s and then took on new life in 2002 with passage of the No Child Left Behind Law. It sought to use curriculum guidelines and high-stakes testing to raise the level of academic achievement in schools and to reduce the differences in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Third was the school choice movement, which began as a political force early in the 1990s. It aimed to break the public monopoly on education by empowering individual consumers, and by the early

2000s, it extended its scope by arguing that inner-city residents should have the same school options that wealthy suburbanites had always enjoyed.

### **WHAT SCHOOLS CAN'T DO AND WHAT THIS BOOK WON'T DO**

The history of American school reform helps us see what has made reform so ineffective. Reformers have continually tried to impose social missions on schools and then failed to accomplish them, because consumers—the families who send children to school—have had something entirely different in mind. Consumers have wanted schools to allow them to accomplish goals that are less noble socially but more resonant personally: to get ahead and stay ahead. The school system, I argue, emerged as the unintended consequence of these consumer preferences, expressed through the cumulative choices made by families trying to fortify the future of their children through the medium of schooling. In short, the vision of education as a private good (formed by the self-interested actions of individual consumers) has consistently won out over education as a public good (formed by the social aims of reform movements).

My argument is that schooling in America has emerged from this history as a bad way to fix social problems but a good way to express (if not realize) personal dreams. The problem is that these dreams are deeply conflicted and thus the school system is conflicted as well. We want it to meet the ambitions of our children and also to protect them from the ambitions of other people's children. So schooling lets us have it both ways. The costs, however, are high. We find ourselves in harness to the system we created, which continually spurs us on to greater academic effort without ever letting us reach the finish line. After all, the only way schooling can both let my child get ahead of yours and yours stay ahead of mine is by constantly expanding the system upward, which allows every increase in educational access to be followed by an increase of educational advantage. Both parties in this com-

petition find their educational costs rising without being able to change their relative position in the race. In this way, the system really lets us have it, both ways.

That is what this book is about, but I also want to make clear what it is not about. This book is not a guidebook for reformers and policymakers. I'm not trying to reform schools or set educational policy; my approach is analytical rather than prescriptive. I have no intention of providing answers for the reader about how to fix schools or how to fix society. Instead of reforming schools, my aim is to explore how the school system developed and how it works, in its own peculiar way.

I am not touting the system or trashing it; I'm simply trying to understand it. And in the process of developing an understanding of this convoluted, dynamic, contradictory, and expensive system, I hope to convey a certain degree of wonder and respect for it. I have to admire how it does what we want it to do, even as it shrugs off what we ask it to do. In its own way the system is extraordinarily successful, not just because it is so huge and continues to grow so rapidly but because it stands at the heart of the peculiarly American approach to promoting the public welfare. As we will see, this approach emerged early in our history. Unlike Europeans, who in the nineteenth century chose to promote social *equality* by constructing an elaborate *welfare* system, Americans chose to provide social *opportunity* by constructing an elaborate *school* system. We're still living with the consequences of that choice.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 examines the evolving social missions for education promoted by American school reformers, from the common school movement in the early nineteenth century to the standards and choice movements in the early twenty-first century. In it I show a shift from political to economic purposes, and a parallel shift from schooling citizens to schooling consumers. Chapter 2 explains the founding of American schooling, looking at the colonial

approach to education, the emergence of the social crisis of the early nineteenth century, and the invention of the common school system in response to this crisis. Chapter 3 looks at the reshaping of the school system in the progressive era, triggered by the social crisis at the start of the twentieth century, when both reformers and consumers saw schools, especially high schools, as the answer. I conclude that the common school movement imposed an indelible stamp on the form, function, and rationale of the American school system, but by the progressive era consumers were calling the shots. By the 1920s all of the central elements of the American system of schooling were locked in place. These were best exemplified by the central educational invention of the period, the tracked comprehensive high school, which opened its doors to all but also carefully monitored the exits.

At this point in the book I turn from a historical account of school reform to a structural analysis of why progressivism and subsequent reforms were so ineffective in reforming schools, especially in changing the core of teaching and learning in classrooms. Chapter 4 focuses on one factor that has made reform difficult: the organization of the school system. It turns out that the loose coupling of the various segments of the school system and the weak control over instruction by school administrators have buffered the classroom from reform efforts. Chapter 5 focuses on another factor, the structure of teaching as a professional practice, which has meant that teachers need to develop a personal style of instruction that can motivate the learning of unwilling students in the self-contained classroom. This in turn has made teachers understandably reluctant to alter their practice in response to demands from reformers.

In the last part of the book I link the historical argument from the first three chapters (the various efforts of school reformers to solve social problems) with the structural argument in chapters 4 and 5 (the organizational arrangements and teaching practices that have impeded these efforts). In Chapter 6, I explore the reasons for the feeble ability of school reform to have a major impact on the

key social problems that reformers have stressed: to promote citizenship, social equality, social mobility, and economic productivity. This discussion continues in Chapter 7, where I examine in detail the most prominent American rationale for schooling and school reform in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: to increase the productive skills of the workforce and promote economic growth. In the end, I argue, schools have turned out to be a weak and inefficient economic investment, and the most useful learning that students acquire in schools comes from doing school rather than learning the curriculum. In Chapter 8 I pull these pieces together, looking at why the school syndrome has persisted in the United States, why the American school system has been so resistant to reformers, and why consumers have trounced reformers in the effort to shape school and society. In the end, the system does what we want as consumers, even if it doesn't do what we ask as reformers, and that is a mixed blessing. As a result, we find ourselves trapped on an educational treadmill of our own making, running hard just to stay in place.