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Public Schools and The American Dream

In the years to follow, I hope we will dedicate ourselves as a nation to giving all our children the world-class education they need. There is no challenge more important.

—President Bill Clinton, 2000

There is no greater test of our national responsibility than the quality of the education we provide.

—Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore, 2000

We have a great national opportunity — to ensure that every child, in every public school, is challenged by high standards. . . [t]o build a culture of achievement that matches the optimism and aspirations of our country.

—Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, 2000

Jennifer Hochschild

IT IS NO coincidence that the president and the candidates were echoing one another in the fall of last year; they were reflecting public opinion as well as deep values held by almost all Americans.* Throughout the 1990s, most Americans agreed that education is “the most important problem facing the nation,” or “most important in [my] vote for president,” or one of “the most important factors in determining how a child grows up.” Even the *Economist* lectured Britain’s former subjects that the new American president “will have to get to grips with the public education system. This is America’s last best chance to tackle” what it called the “failure” of public education.

Citizens, politicians, and journalists are right about the importance of schooling. Education increasingly determines a person’s job prospects and income. It has more and more influence on whom one will marry. Its impact is more important than anything else (possibly excepting

wealth) in determining whether one participates in politics, what one believes politically, and how much political influence one has. It is the arena in which the United States has sought to deal with racial domination and class hierarchy, to turn immigrants into Americans, to turn children into responsible citizens, to create and maintain democracy—or at least its semblance. Public education is, in short, the place where Americans seek to transform the ideology of the American dream into practice.

The American dream is the promise that all who live in the United States have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they understand it (material or otherwise) through their own efforts and resources. Equal opportunity to become unequal, to succeed (or fail) because of what one does, not who one is, is a central part of the American dream.

The American dream is a brilliant ideological invention, although its realization is considerably less impressive. The institutions, practices, and ideas in which it is embodied encourage each person in the United States to pursue success *and* create the framework within which everyone can do that. They hold each person responsible for achieving his or her own dreams, while generating the shared value of the equal chance. They hold out a vision of

*This article is an overview of much of the forthcoming book by Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, tentatively titled *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

both individual success and collective good.

Public schools in this country are the central institutions for bringing both parts of the dream into practice. Schools are expected to teach children enough so that they can choose their own vision of success and then to give them the skills they need to pursue that vision—and they are also expected to incorporate all students into the polity and give them the habits and values needed to maintain a democratic government. The American public widely endorses both of these goals and supports public education and pays for it at a fairly high level.

However, the goals of the American dream sometimes conflict; what is (or seems to be) good for the individual might not be good for society as a whole and vice versa. Because schools are so important to the way the dream works, and because of their cost, debates over education policy have always been contentious.

The list of such fights over just the past few decades is long: school desegregation, finance equalization, vouchers, bilingual education, special education, high-stakes testing, tracking, Afrocentric curricula, the teaching of evolution. These are partly, of course, debates over pedagogy, but they have much more of an edge than that. Contests over school finance and reform, like contests over separating students by race, language proficiency, academic talent, or disability usually revolve around the importance of individual success for a comparatively privileged group of students versus the collective good of all students or of the nation as a whole. In cases such as Afrocentrism or creationism, citizens use arguments over schooling to challenge the validity of the American dream itself or its value for particular groups of Americans.

The nature of schooling is shaped by these conflicts. Because most Americans believe in the collective values of the American dream—equal opportunity, respect for those who are different, upholding the responsibilities of democratic citizenship—public schools have made real progress toward enabling all students to pursue their dreams and toward promoting a democratic polity. Compared with four decades ago, dropout rates have declined; children with disabilities are in school buildings rather than human warehouses; resources are

more equally distributed; black children are not required by law to attend inferior schools for fewer hours a day and shorter school years than white children; achievement scores are up; and gaps between the achievement of Anglo and black or Latino children have declined.

Yet this progress is limited. Efforts to promote equal opportunity and democracy hit almost insuperable barriers when enough people believe that those efforts will endanger the comparative advantage of their own children or children like theirs. At that point, a gap arises between what most Americans believe and what they are actually willing to do over the long term. Thus Hispanics and inner-city students still drop out much more frequently than others; achievement scores have changed little since 1990; the gap between black and white students actually rose in the course of the nineties. Some urban schools seem to teach nothing despite the valiant efforts of many of their teachers and students; and achievement gaps between affluent and poor students have barely budged or even grown. Most important, while life chances depend increasingly on attaining higher education, the percentage of people completing college has pretty much stalled since the 1970s, and class background is almost as important as ever in determining who attends and finishes college.

THE GAP between what Americans believe and what they are willing to do also generates policies that are irrational, in the sense that they are inconsistent with or not based on available evidence. At times, policymakers have abandoned proven reforms; desegregation, for example, enhanced the life chances of many African-American students and did not hurt white students, but the movement to complete the desegregation process has been largely inactive for the last twenty-five years. School finance reform broadens opportunities for poor children without harming those who are better off, but equity in funding has depended mostly on the intermittent intervention of the courts. At other times, policymakers have adopted reforms for which there is no strong empirical support. Despite mixed evidence (at best) for the benefits of separating students according to academic

achievement or language ability, the first of these practices is almost universal and the latter is widespread. And charter schools or public-private choice programs have been widely advocated without convincing evidence that they make any difference at all.

How to explain irrational policymaking? Public officials have at least partly accepted the claim that pursuing the collective goals of the American dream would endanger the individual achievement of children in the majority or privileged sectors. Or they have been persuaded that some panacea exists that would promote the collective good while retaining the privileges of the well-off. Under pressure, policymakers have been willing to sacrifice the wider objectives or put them at risk for the sake of the narrower ones, whether or not there is good evidence that the two are in conflict.

THIS IRRATIONALITY is most apparent when it comes to reforms that could have the greatest impact and that have the soundest research support. Where it has been tried, educating poor children *with* students who are more privileged or educating them *like* students who are more privileged has improved their performance and long-term chance of success. Quality preschool, individual reading instruction, small classes in the early grades, and consistently challenging academic courses have been shown to help disadvantaged children achieve, just as they enable middle-class children to achieve. Similarly, it helps all students to have peers who take school seriously, behave in ways that help them learn, and are backed by parents who will complain and organize if the school does not do its best to educate their children. Most important, qualified, knowledgeable teachers make a difference. Well-off children almost always attend schools that have most of these features; poor children too frequently do not.

An honest attempt to secure a good education for poor children therefore leaves policymakers with two difficult choices. They can, ideally, send them to schools in wealthier neighborhoods. Or they can, as a plausible second best, seek to give them an education in their own neighborhoods that has the features of schooling for well-off students. The former

has proved to be too expensive politically, and the latter has often been too expensive financially. Americans want all children to have a real chance to learn, and they want all schools to foster democracy and promote the common good, but they do not want these things enough to make them happen.

Demography and history further widen the gap between belief in the American dream and willingness to put it into practice. In the United States, class is intimately connected with race and immigration. Legal racial discrimination has been abolished, but prejudice and racial hierarchy remain, and racial or ethnic inequities reinforce class disparities. The overlap adds more difficulties to the already difficult relationship between individual and collective goals, in large part because it adds anxieties about diversity and citizenship to concerns about opportunity and competition.

Conflicts over schooling choices will never be resolved, because they spring from a paradox at the core of the American dream. Most Americans believe that everyone has the right to pursue success but that only some deserve to win, based on their talents, energy, or ambition. The American dream is egalitarian at the starting point in the "race of life" but not at the end. This is not the central paradox, but simply the ideological choice that sets it up. The paradox lies in the fact that one generation's finish is the next generation's start. People who succeed get to keep the fruits of their labor and use them as they wish. If they buy a home where the schools are better and the children are like their own or if they invest more in making their children's schools better, their children will have a head start and other children will fall behind through no fault of their own. Schools are supposed to equalize opportunities across generations and to create democratic citizens out of each generation, but people naturally wish to give their own children an economic head start or political protection, and some can do it. But some can't. This circle cannot be squared.

Thus public schools are essential to make the American dream work, but schools are also the arena in which many Americans first fail. Failure there almost certainly guarantees failure from then on. In the dream, failure re-

sults from lack of individual merit and effort; in reality, failure in school too closely tracks structures of racial and class inequality. Schools too often reinforce rather than contend against the intergenerational paradox at the heart of the American dream. That is understandable but not acceptable.

THIS ARGUMENT has implications for many school policies. Implementing the American dream in public schools will never lead to equality, but it could promote greater fairness. Our recommendations mostly suggest ways to bolster the collective goals—equal opportunity, diversity, training for democratic citizenship—in the face of powerful parental commitment to the individual goals. We expect readers of *Dissent* to agree with our underlying end and with most of our proposals, but we anticipate that many will reject one or another of them. We believe, however, that our positions are internally consistent and represent the best means of promoting the American dream for *all* Americans and for the nation as a whole.

School desegregation was Americans' most sustained effort in the twentieth century to address the evils of racial domination in public schooling. The endeavor epitomized the ideals of the American dream and revealed its most intractable internal conflicts.

School desegregation was implemented widely, and it largely succeeded in educational terms where it was actually practiced. Both white and black students are much more likely to attend school with students of the other race now than they were in 1960; this is, ironically, especially true in the South. Schools have indeed become more racially separated over the past twenty years, but much of the desegregation that occurred earlier remains in place. There is no evidence that whites were harmed by desegregation, and plenty of evidence that they gained in test scores, high school graduation, and college attendance during the period of greatest integration. Where desegregation was reasonably implemented, black students also gained academically as measured by test scores, years of schooling, and likelihood of attending and graduating from college. In most cases, members of both races became more comfortable with each other, more likely to work in de-

segregated settings as adults, more likely to claim friends of the other race, and more likely to support further forms of desegregation.

School desegregation has mostly failed in political terms, though. Courts are systematically dismantling desegregation plans now in place—even when increased racial separation would result. Most segregation now occurs across district lines rather than within school districts, and there is virtually no support for district consolidation or redrawing of district lines. Except in a very few cases, neither blacks nor whites (nor Latinos or Asians) are pushing for desegregation.

In short, school desegregation could have been a widespread educational success but was halted by political opposition. This effort to achieve the collective good by equalizing opportunity and teaching all students how to be democratic citizens was not able to win out against fears for individual success, first for white students and eventually for black students. For pragmatic reasons, I do not argue for major efforts to mandate desegregation as a way to achieve the individual or collective goals of public schooling in the foreseeable future.

When reformers realized that they could anticipate little more change in racial inequalities in schooling, they shifted their attention to class inequalities. The Supreme Court declined to find a national constitutional right to equal or adequate school funding, so reformers turned to the states. As of now, more than forty states have addressed questions of *school finance reform*, and more than half of these have changed their funding formulas during the past few decades.

The results are considerable, but not completely successful either financially or substantively. In states with court orders to which legislatures have responded, all public schools received greater increases in funding compared with schools in most other states, and districts are more equally funded. Still, more than half of the states have not redistributed school resources in any substantial way, large gaps between wealthy and poor districts persist even in states that have implemented finance reform, and the largest gaps of all occur between wealthy and poor states.

Has school finance reform improved the

quality and outcomes of schooling? This question has generated a substantial scholarly debate with no definitive resolution. Nevertheless, raising teachers' salaries, enhancing their training and professional development, instituting small classes in the early grades, creating high-quality preschools, providing tutoring and other individualized instruction where appropriate, improving the curriculum—substantial evidence shows that all of these changes *do* make a difference in outcomes for students, especially poor students. And all of them cost a lot of money. Parents intuitively know that; homebuyers who can afford to do so are willing to pay a substantial premium to buy houses in districts that spend a lot on their schools.

In my view, further school finance equalization is essential. As with school desegregation, most Americans agree in principle. But they resist in practice: few are willing to accept even a minimal risk to their own children's prospects for the sake of the collective goals of equal opportunity and a well-educated citizenry. There is new evidence that it could take considerably more money in deeply poor school districts than in middle-class ones to give all children an equal opportunity to gain from their schooling. I hold little hope that many Americans will subordinate the individual side of the American dream to the collective side to anywhere near this extent.

IF STATES WILL not transfer enough students or resources to ensure that every child enjoys a middle-class education, we need to turn our attention to *other kinds of school reform*. After a long history of seeking to improve various components of schooling, reformers now focus increasingly on systemic school reform. Its most visible and controversial element is "standards," sometimes measured by high-stakes testing.

Standards-based reforms require that all students (including those in bilingual or special education) be held accountable for learning skills and information specified by their state and increasingly measured by a set of tests that they must pass before promotion or graduation. Standards and their accompanying tests may be extensive or narrow, precisely objective or broadly subjective, designed to hold back

only those below a low threshold or to require "higher-order thinking," focused only on student accountability or also on teacher and school accountability, and so on. They may penalize students who have learning problems or who have been subjected to years of atrocious teaching, or they may inspire students and educators alike to focus on learning, address areas of weakness, and attend to students of all ability levels and all races or ethnic groups. This is truly a case where implementation matters, and the devil is in the details.

I endorse standards that cover a wide array of subjects and hold all students at all grade levels to high expectations, so long as students alone are not held accountable and so long as they are given the resources needed to learn. Absent efforts to create standards, teach to them, and then measure learning and respond to the measurement, too many students—especially those who are poor, black or Hispanic, non-native English speakers, or in special education—have been allowed or forced to slide through their schooling without learning much of anything. Providing teachers and administrators as well as students with the materials they need, giving unsuccessful students enough time and sustained attention to make up for past neglect, and *only* then, if ever, penalizing educators and students for unnecessary failure and rewarding them for success should enhance opportunities for all students. The National Academy of Sciences, among other groups, has identified criteria for ensuring that all students are helped rather than punished by standards-based reforms. Given such protections, "the battle over standards and accountability is a continuation of the civil rights struggle. Standards and accountability expose the sham that passes for education in many heavily minority schools and provide measurements and pressure to prod schools to target resources where they are needed most," in the words of civil rights lawyer William Taylor.

Properly implemented standards and testing will enhance the public good, increase the chances of individual poor and nonwhite children to pursue success, and do nothing to harm the chances of all other children. For this reason, I cautiously support some elements of the education reform bills recently passed by the

U.S. House and Senate and promoted by President Bush. The pending legislation has plenty of traps, hence caution is warranted. There is a good deal more emphasis on testing than on providing resources to help students pass the tests. And at this writing there is a strong possibility that states will be permitted to meet their testing goals by boosting the scores of (mostly white) middle-class children while allowing poor (disproportionately nonwhite) children to fail or drop out, and so on. But the underlying premise—that schools need to demonstrate success in enabling all students to learn, not just to show that they have tried to teach—seems exactly right. Again, the devil is in the details.

One of the controversies swirling around standards-based reform focuses on *who* should be included in high-stakes testing. This is a special case of a broader set of issues having to do with *separation of students with particular characteristics* from other students. Proponents of separation argue that special education students and English learners will do best in separate classes that attend to their particular needs, at least for part of their schooling. I, however, side with those who oppose separation except in unusual cases. That implies that most special education students should be “mainstreamed” in regular classes and that most students with limited English proficiency should join English-speaking classes.

THESE ARE controversial positions, but they are more closely aligned with the American dream in public schooling than are separationist policies. Throughout American history, separate education has almost always meant unequal education; students who remain outside regular classes too often suffer stigma and receive grossly inadequate schooling from poorly qualified and ill-paid teachers. Special education and bilingual education have frequently been vehicles for racial, ethnic, class, and gender-based segregation. There is no persuasive evidence that separation improves schooling outcomes for the students involved. Even in the best teaching circumstances, students who are separated—as well as all other students—lose the chance to experience diversity in their classroom and to learn respect for and accommodation of

those with different skills, backgrounds, competencies, and perspectives. They thus miss crucial training for democratic citizenship.

Inclusion in regular classrooms is not a money-saving device. Students with special needs and English learners will often require classroom aides; teachers and possibly parents and other students will need training; curricula and pedagogy may have to be changed. (These changes may themselves benefit all students, not just those with distinctive needs.) Nor should inclusion be a blanket policy with no exceptions. The courts have ruled that if inclusion is too costly, too harmful to other students, or too detrimental to the social or educational development of the student in question, separation is appropriate. But both the individual and the collective goals of the American dream are best promoted by assuming that, absent strong evidence to the contrary, students should be included in regular classrooms rather than taught separately.

Tracking or ability grouping raises the broadest issue of inclusion and separation. Rigid tracking across all subjects for many years of schooling probably harms most students and benefits, at most, only a few; thankfully, schools increasingly abjure it, at least officially. It is not defensible in a democratic polity.

More flexible ability grouping is harder to judge. Most case studies show that it is racially or ethnically discriminatory; most quantitative analyses show little or no racial discrimination *per se* but much class-based discrimination. Even more problematically, analysts and educators can reach no empirically based consensus on who benefits and who is harmed by ability grouping. Too much evidence shows that the worst teachers, most uninspired and unchallenging curricula, and lowest expectations are visited on children in the lowest groups, and the best resources flow disproportionately to the children in the highest groups. But evidence does not show clearly whether ability grouping in itself would be problematic or beneficial to most students *if* all the things that encourage learning were more evenly distributed across the groups.

Significant detracking is not politically feasible in most school districts; middle-class families of all races and ethnic groups would

block it or leave the public schools. It also may not always be educationally appropriate; no educator should endorse a system in which both the highest- and lowest-ability students will be bored, anxious, or intimidated in class. But ability grouping is not the right general starting point for a society based on the American dream. The ideal solution might be heterogeneous classrooms in which the teachers have the training and curricular materials to challenge all students—but that will take decades and a significant improvement in the quality of teaching. An acceptable interim solution in my view combines several strategies—minimal grouping (at most) in grade schools, only slightly more grouping (especially in math) in middle schools, and more extensive grouping that is as flexible as possible in high schools. Educators should concentrate on raising the floor and opening access to the ceiling by ensuring that all grade-schoolers can read and compute, providing algebra for all middle school students, creating challenging classes for all high school students, redistributing the best teachers and making the most promising curricular innovations available to all, eliminating all bias in assignments, and maintaining high expectations for all students with extensive support services as needed.

That these sound like prescriptions for standards-based reform is not a coincidence. These are the changes that would enhance the chances of the worst-off children (while reassuring the others so they remain in the public system), increase diversity within classrooms, and improve training for democratic citizenship. They will also help all students to learn at high levels.

I have said nothing so far about *school choice* because I see it as the least important of the current educational issues in dispute in the United States. That seems an odd statement given the political visibility of contests over vouchers and the growing enthusiasm for charter schools. But fewer than twenty thousand students are in publicly funded voucher programs—less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the students in public schools, fewer than one-fifth of those being homeschooled—and we see no clear indication that those numbers will increase much. Vouchers have the peculiar characteristic of being politically damaging to both

major political parties. Many (in some surveys, a majority) of the natural constituents of the Democratic Party endorse voucher experiments; that includes African-Americans, the young, the poor, parents of school-aged children, and city residents. But Democratic leaders and constituencies such as teachers' unions oppose such experiments. The ideological home of the voucher movement is among Republican Party elites. But many—probably most—of the natural constituents of the Republican Party oppose any voucher experiment that would bring poor urban students of color into "their" schools. Not a single suburb has responded to educators', judges', and legislators' repeated pleas to join the Cleveland voucher program. Nor do any participate in the plan in Milwaukee, the only other publicly funded urban voucher program. So despite their preferences for markets, many Republican activists have ducked the issue. Vouchers and related plans have lost overwhelmingly in a dozen statewide referenda over the past few decades, have never come close to succeeding in Congress, and have almost always been defeated in state legislatures.

Public school choice is more promising, to the degree that it brings energetic and idealistic reformers into the public school system, keeps well-off families in public schools, enhances the chances of poor students in dismal urban schools, and enables all students and teachers to find an environment with an appropriate learning style for them. Charter schools may on balance decrease diversity of all kinds, but the evidence is too thin so far to be certain; if it turns out that they do, then we must once again set priorities among the goals of public education. But at this point experimentation seems appropriate.

The most compelling arguments for choice have been made on behalf of children trapped in failing schools. If a voucher program permitted urban children to attend schools in wealthier (and whiter) districts, it would increase racial and class integration for all students as well as the chances for individual success of poor, predominantly nonwhite children. But if the previous paragraph is correct, the politics of choice will resemble the politics of desegregation: most middle-class whites pro-

less belief and few are willing to participate. Furthermore, the number of private schools is small, and their capacity to accommodate additional students is very limited. So is their willingness to participate, in many cases. Once again, a major reform proposal—this time from the right rather than the left—will sputter out because too many Americans fear its impact on the achievement of their own children.

Disputes over how to promote the American dream in public schools will never be resolved because of the intergenerational paradox. But the disputes can be more or less fierce, and the collective goals can attain more or less balance with the relentless drive for individual advantage. The crucial question that we now face is whether the tension among the goals of schooling can move any closer toward resolution as the makeup of American society changes, and with it, the social order.

THE CHANGING profile of Americans is reflected first in the public schools; Hispanic children already outnumber African-American children by several million. At present, not quite 13 percent of Americans are over sixty-five. By 2025, aging baby boomers will make that figure roughly 20 percent. At the same time, the Anglo proportion of Americans is projected to become smaller, decreasing from 70 percent in 2000 to about 60 percent in 2025 and close to 50 percent in 2050. The Latino population will double, reaching perhaps a quarter of all Americans. (These figures ignore racial and ethnic intermarriage.) Immigrants, especially those from Latin America, are younger than the average American and have larger families, so the school-aged population will grow at the same time that the elderly population is growing.

A larger and more diverse school population, combined with a larger and relatively homogeneous elderly population, could create a series of difficult policy dilemmas. The need for schooling for the young will be great at the same time that the demand for health care and social services for the elderly will peak. The potential for social division—across generations, races, classes, and systems of belief—will be very high. Will political leaders inflame these divisions or seek to ameliorate them?

Some political actors will no doubt yield to the temptation for demagoguery. But others might take a different stance. As they become more secure in the peculiarities of American politics, leaders of different ethnic groups will be better able to look for coalitions rather than focus on competition. And with the potential for social and political chaos so great, it is just possible that more Americans will want their leaders on the high road rather than in the swamp; in that case, (some) candidates may see a winning strategy in promoting the values of participation, respect, and equal opportunity. As in the decades around the turn of the last century, the large and growing group of immigrants themselves have had the experience of exclusion combined with a strong desire to become Americans; for them the collective and the individual goals of schooling could be joined. As in the New Deal era, a large and growing group of new Americans may think of themselves as disadvantaged or feel sympathy with the disadvantaged, without being totally embittered. (Hispanics in California, for example, are much more likely than others to place themselves among the “have nots” and to agree that “the government should do more to make sure that all Californians have an equal opportunity to succeed.”) They too may turn to the schools for help, for others as well as themselves.

Class issues will remain the most difficult barriers to progress, and ethnic and racial issues will not go away. For better and for worse, the intergenerational paradox embedded in the ideology of the American dream, as well as the ennobling vision it sometimes represents, will continue to shape public schooling in the United States. If poor and non-Anglo children are not given enough resources, fair access to good teachers, and connections with the rest of society, the ideology of the American dream will be just a cover for systematic injustice. But we have an opportunity to create schools that embody the dream at its generous best rather than its hypocritical worst. ●

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