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Abdulahi Salam  
Prof. Anderson

## **Rise of Meritocracy Under The No Child Left Behind Act: A Look Into NCLB's Effects on Low-Income Students**

### **Abstract**

*This paper uses the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to analyze the rise of meritocracy in American public education and its effect on low-income, minority students. NCLB grew out of a global need to produce, compete and innovate, and the public education infrastructure was used to manufacture workers. Schools focused on categorizing students by test scores and placing students on different educational, economic, and career paths. Success under meritocracy is individualist and disregards the systems of inequality that determine the losers and winners. Minority students are blamed for their lack of success instead of examining outside factors that dictate their living conditions. Meritocracy does not promote upward mobility for low-income, minority students; it abandons them in favor of students who have the luxury and luck to compete in the game of education. Schools should teach based on respect, equity, and fairness in place of a merit-based approach.*

It's only appropriate that I tell you a little bit about myself. I was born on May 8, 2000, in Lagos, Nigeria. I was one of two children in a single, exposed brick bedroom. My mother, father, and brother lived on one bed and shared our kitchen and showers with the rest of the residents in our building. We didn't have running water or electricity, and I took showers outside with water I fetched from a nearby well. By some divine miracle, after having my younger sister, my mother was able to come to the US, while I lived with my father and older brother. Her arrival here marked a new beginning for us. She was able to send us money and clothes, and our condition began to improve quickly. We moved out of the one-bedroom apartment and into a two-bedroom with more space. She visited when she can, and eventually, after 4 years, we were able to move into a big house. We no longer shared bathrooms, and we had access to some electricity. After 5 years of living in the U.S., my mother was able to bring my sister, brother, father, and me together under the same roof again. That was in January 2010, and I'm creeping into my 13th

year in the states. I have gone through America's elementary, middle, and high school systems. I am now a senior at Swarthmore College. Rags to riches? Not quite. Rags to low-middle class? That sounds more like it. Anyways, I look back to my very humble beginnings, and I think about merit. I think about how hard my mother worked. I think about how hard millions of other families work to become financially comfortable.

Did we get lucky? Did we deserve it? I currently live in a "first-world" country that champions individuality and neoliberalism. A society that thrives on competition and exploitation. Reflecting on where I was and where I find myself, it is difficult to say my family "deserves" their current life. To believe so is to simplify and trivialize the experiences of their people. To believe so is to put our affairs in competition with others. Finally, it suggests that competition was the motivation for coming to the U.S.

Upon coming here, I was unknowingly pulled into a system of that championed meritocracy. In these American schools, I was taught that I had to pull myself up by the bootstraps and work to deserve praise, a job, and my desired future. However, wanting better for oneself does not mean it comes at the expense of others.

What do I mean by Meritocracy? It certainly is a charged word, but I'll try to make it digestible. For the purpose of this paper, meritocracy is a largely liberal idea whose defining features are competition and perceived equality of opportunity (Talib & Fitzgerald 2015, 447), regardless of social class, economic background, gender, or race. Meritocracy is used to stimulate the economy and "facilitate constructive competition among employees" and students. In this paper, I will explore how American public education systems came to be governed by meritocracy. I will also examine how the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 negatively affects

marginalized and minority students, looking specifically at upwards mobility and student mental health. I will conclude with a solution proposal.

### **Testing and The Rise of Meritocracy In Education**

America's meritocracy developed with the rise of a global economy. Meritocracy also arose in the public school education system. Early education in America was not concerned with a global economy or identity building. Rather, two different methods of schooling emerged as dominant in the Colonial period. The first was infant schools (Janak, 2019) that primarily served poorer families because they were believed to be incapable of raising their children. The second was district schools (Janak, 2019). Local residents divided themselves along district and geographic lines and began taxing themselves to support their local schools. This phenomenon introduced schooling to the public sphere and influence. This trend continued well into the Early Nation period (1789-1837) when schools were tasked with nation-building. The newly independent nation wanted "its own language, culture, literature, and tradition, and looked to the schools to create and perpetuate these" (Janak, 2019). Schools have always served as knowledge vehicles and act as reflections of the communities they serve. With their new independence, the colonies wanted schools to champion democracy and condemn tyranny and corruption. Schools were spaces where students were taught trades so that they could participate in the economy; they were taught in the sciences and made to absorb vocational responsibilities. Education became an important aspect of the public sector, interwoven with the political and economic sectors. It's important to note that these teachings remain fundamental aspects of public education today. We're still taught to defend democracy, and schools feed workers directly into our economy.

The Common School movement marked another turning point in the creation of modern public schools. The United States was experiencing an influx of European immigrants, and many came with their own languages, cultures, and customs. It was increasingly more difficult to “draw on a common Western or European tradition as a source of collective identity” (Salomone, 2001). White Anglo-Saxons were worried about how the new immigrants would alter and taint American ideals. Horace Mann, a Boston lawyer and Massachusetts State Superintendent of Education, advocated for a national education system to unify Americans and immigrants under a banner of patriotism and American democracy. He advocated for “free access to elementary and secondary education, a modest equalization of resources across localities, the assimilation of a diverse population...and public affair” (Mondale, 2002). Common schools were to have similar and distinct infrastructure that would separate them from local or religious institutions. Although common schools sought to distance themselves from any church influences, students, nonetheless, were taught using the protestant mold of belief, meaning that schools took on religious undertones (Janak, 2019). The table below from *Education In The Common School Period* by Edward Janak illustrates this idea. Finally, common schools operated using standardized curriculums. These curriculums were not intended to teach with ulterior motives; it was schooling for the sake of schooling. However, common schools weren’t so common. They were only accessible to white, protestant, upper-working middle-class families. In this sense, the system embodied the American Dream, rewarding white Americans for working hard and climbing the social ladder because schools were a path to economic mobility that was accessible to minority groups and immigrants. Like any social system of the time, common schools excluded Black, indigenous peoples, and women.

<b>Faith-based religion has...</b>	<b>Which became in the secular, civic religion...</b>
Holy book <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Torah, Koran, Bible, etc.</li> </ul>	Sacred documents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constitution, Declaration of Independence, etc.</li> </ul>
Saints/revered figures	Founding fathers
Formalized hierarchy/clerics	System of federal, state, local political leaders
Global headquarters for the faith <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vatican, Canterbury, Mecca, Bodh Gaya, Puri, etc.</li> </ul>	Washington, DC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smithsonian Institutes, etc.</li> </ul>
Houses of worship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Temple, mosque, church, synagogue, cathedral, etc.</li> </ul>	Governmental buildings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Courthouses, state legislatures, Congress, White House, etc.</li> </ul>
Tithing	Taxation
Holy War <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jihad, Crusades, etc.</li> </ul>	"Spreading democracy" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War I</li> </ul>
Holy days	Holidays
Formal prayers and hymns	Pledge of allegiance, national anthem
Pilgrimage, formal or informal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mecca, Jerusalem, etc.</li> </ul>	Pilgrimage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Washington, DC; field trips to state government, etc.</li> </ul>
Shrines	Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson Monuments, etc.

(Janak 2019, 33)

But then it turned towards individuality and meritocracy. How did this shift happen? The 20th century marked a drastic increase in production and globalization. The United States entered an educational arms race with the Soviet Union after WWII. The Soviet Union launched the first orbiting satellite in 1957, and the United States responded the following year with the National Defense Education Act. The US felt threatened by the technological advancements made by the Soviets, and the NDEA aimed to stimulate and strengthen American education reform by providing \$1 billion over four years to be infused into 40,000 loans, 40,000 scholarships, and 1,500 graduate fellowships (Fleming, 1960). The NDEA mostly targeted stem initiatives so American students could be better prepared to compete with other global superpowers. The funds were directed to public and private college institutions, laying the groundwork for other similar policies targeting public elementary, middle, and high school

education. Education was weaponized as a tool of the state rather than a system primarily focused on schooling. Schools focused more on testing, which promoted competition in the classroom. Students' outcomes and futures were to be predicted by their test scores, which did not consider other non-educational/testing factors that shape student experiences inside and outside the classroom.

The US was engaging in an education and technological arms race while it was in the Cold War with the Soviet Union from the 1950s-1990. There was a domestic push for non-collegiate public schools to adopt the same passion for stem and competition. With industrialization came the transformation of classrooms into factories to produce workers. Curriculums were dominated by industrial training, and students were taught to become active participants in business and the economy. The introduction of the IQ test and SAT in 1926 meant that “schools offered some children job training and groomed others for future leadership” (Mondale, 2002). Students were encouraged to work hard and were told that they were solely responsible for their social and educational outcomes.

The sentiment that students needed to work harder and compete to participate in the national and global economy continued into the early 2000s. The NDEA was proposed in response to a sentiment that the US was falling behind on the global scene, and the same concern dominated American politics at the turn of the 21st century. Despite increased federal funding, reading and math scores have shown little improvement. On January 8, 2002, the Bush administration passed the No Child Left Behind Act, which “establishes a comprehensive framework of standards, testing, and accountability absent in previous federal legislation” (Fusarelli, 2004). This new policy marked a shift in government involvement in k-12 education. Prior policies were hands-off and allowed local governments to control district schools. NCLB

required “annual testing of students in Grades 3-8 in reading and math, plus at least one test in Grades 10-12; science testing to follow. Graduation rates are used as a secondary indicator of success for high schools” (Karen, 2005). States were required to set “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) goals for each school. Schools that repeatedly failed to meet their AYP goals were subject to “restructuring” which often meant that teacher and principals were fired. Schools were also vulnerable to takeovers by the state or private corporations (Karen, 2005). The NCLB remains the most impactful policy that continues to shape k-12 education. It has ushered in an era of unprecedented competitiveness among schools and students while championing individualism and meritocracy in the classroom. NCLB will be the primary medium that I’ll use to examine the negative effects of meritocracy in public on students.

### **Shortcomings of The NCLB**

The No Child Left Behind Act was a groundbreaking act that has had sweeping and lasting impacts on public education. Although this paper primarily focuses on its negative effects on schools and students, the act did some good. First, it mandated that states and school districts track student performances by race and class (Darling-Hammond, 2007); this helped highlight glaring inequality in the education system and directed schools to focus their attention and resources on helping marginalized students. Second, the law insisted that all students were entitled to quality education and well-equipped teachers. The law has “stimulated recruitment efforts in states where low-income and “minority” students have experienced a revolving door of inexperienced, untrained teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Teachers are the core of the student educational experience, and an improvement in the quality of teachers is an improvement in the quality of education students- especially those in resource-starved school districts and



communities- receive. However, the positives of the law are vastly overshadowed by its problems.

NCLB was created with particular goals in mind, and one of them was to have all students performing at a proficient level by 2012; that was ten years ago. However, it was clear that states set these standards too high, and many schools could not reach their goals. Jaekyung Lee, an assistant professor of education at the University at Buffalo, conducted research looking at the feasibility of the AYP and found that 80 percent of schools in Kentucky were able to meet their goals; “this plummeted to 36 percent in the 4th year, and further down to 10 percent in the 6th year. In Maine, it started as 100 percent in the first year (because baseline AYP goal was set to 0), became 44 percent in the 2nd year, and dropped down to 6 percent in the 9 of 19 4th year” (Lee, 2004). States set their goals too high, forcing schools with limited guidance, time, and resources to shift school and classroom culture. The percentages are even lower when we look at disadvantaged students (students receiving free or reduced lunch. “The percentage of schools that would meet the AYP target for this particularly disadvantaged group in Year 2 is only 6 in Maine and 32 in Kentucky” (Lee, 2004). These students are marked by their test scores rather and viewed as underachievers rather than victims of a failing and unequal education system. The AYP goals were focused on producing students who functioned as robots rather than providing every student with quality education. Schools require additional resources to meet the needs and standards of the state, and it's only logical that at-risk and neglected students are affected by these AYP standards.

The NCLB act and federal testing standards have shifted the focus of school culture away from equity in education. I mentioned earlier that many public schools do not have the resources to properly and equitably pursue their AYP goals. To pass their AYP, schools often diverted their

attention and resources away from students requiring them (usually minority, low-income) to marginal students- those on the cusp of reaching their proficiency goals (Krieg, 2008). Krieg stated:

For instance, when deciding which extracurricular activities to provide, a school administrator, hoping to raise the fraction of students meeting the reading standard, may opt for a reading program that targets marginal students rather than a program for accelerated readers. Alternatively, an administrator may abandon curricula intended to help the lowest-tier students in favor of one that is more appropriate for students marginally below the standard. Administrators may assign marginal students to strong teachers and other students to weaker teachers. Whatever their specific response, this behavior, identified in this article as “strategic instruction,” can lead to lower achievement for students on the tails of the ability distribution (2008).

A system intended to promote meritocracy will have winners and losers, and success is only possible at the expense of the losers. The inequality is masked while students are championed for a success they view as naturally occurring. Research published in the Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (EEPA) found that when given a choice between nine educational goals post NCLB, teachers, and school administrators picked academic excellence or basic skills over other options like personal growth and human relations (Dee et al., 2013). Focusing on a student’s basic skills and educational excellence places them in competition with one another, and students at the top of the educational ladder begin to see themselves as more deserving than their counterparts; they see their successes without understanding the systems of inequality that aided them.

### **Meritocracy and Upward Mobility**

When you go out in the street and ask the everyday person what they believe the goal of schooling to be, most people would say something along the lines of education, job acquisition,

personal growth, or social mobility. Parents send their kids to school to acquire the skills to work competitive jobs and move up the social ladder because they see it as a tool to achieve the American Dream. What is really interesting about meritocracy is that when it works, it works. I mean that it's a system that is massively beneficial to those lucky and resourceful enough to beat the game. As a concept, it makes complete sense- we are responsible for our actions and outcomes. It encourages hard work and responsibility and sneakily presents an equitable formula to attain more success. Those who succeed will defend meritocracy because it validates their efforts and experiences. Those who fail continue to try their luck because they do not understand the inequality and inequity systems at the core of meritocracy, and they will blame themselves.

Those looking to improve their condition look to education as an elevator to upward mobility and a way to acquire high-paying jobs that guarantee economic security. The underlying understanding is that the more one is educated, the more likely they are to “enter the group of higher earning [labor] force regardless of their original social class position” (Themelis, 2008). We're so infatuated with the end goal that we fail to recognize that we are not starting the race in the same position; some are made to start further back, while others are given a headstart. A study<sup>1</sup> by the Southern Education Foundation found that 51 percent of K12 students in 2012-13 were eligible for free or reduced lunch federal program. Public schools serve minority and economically disadvantaged students, the majority of whom start the meritocratic race behind everyone else. These students are less likely to “have support at home, are less frequently exposed to enriching activities outside of school, and are more likely to drop out and never attend college” (Layton, 2015). It's a luxury to be able to wake up and focus fully on academics. Many of these students are more concerned about their next meal or ensuring they have economically stable households to come home to. Nevertheless, looking through a meritocratic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://southerneducation.org/>

lens, they're labeled lazy and unserious about their futures. Upward mobility becomes difficult when economic and social systems serve as obstacles to students. Even more so, meritocracy ignores these issues because it places all responsibilities to succeed on the backs of students who are the victims of so much injustice. Rather than working to address the inequalities that affect its students, the blame is placed on students for not working hard enough and for not taking advantage of the "equal opportunities" presented to them. Upward mobility becomes stagnated or reversed when we ignore the "losers" of a meritocratic system, and it becomes cyclical.

The New York Times published a collection of essays that seek to answer the question: What is School For? One of the essays was written by Ms. Asre Norman, an Indian immigrant and strong advocate for high admissions standards at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a magnet school in Alexandria, Va. She believes that schools are for merit. She worked hard, and she was able to attain a comfortable level of success, and she planned to use that success to put her kids on a similar path. Ms. Norman believes that children thrive when they're challenged and that the fight against meritocracy is a "race to the bottom" (2022). Meritocracy is largely seen as a driving force for a robust economy that's well-equipped to compete globally. It's an idea that promotes micro-competition, which stimulates macro and global competition. This is to say that there are definite positives to this system. Michale Sandel wrote:

An economic system that rewards effort, initiative, and talent is likely to be more productive than one that pays everyone the same, regardless of contribution, or that hands out desirable social positions based on favoritism. Rewarding people strictly based on their merits also had the virtue of fairness; it does not discriminate on any biases other than achievement. A society that rewards merit is also attractive on aspirational grounds. Not only does it promote efficiency and renounce discrimination; it also affirms a certain idea of freedom. This is the idea that our destiny is in our hands, that our success does not depend on forces beyond our control, that it's up to us (2012, 34).

A merit-based system helps a nation compete in the global economy, and if a nation's goal is to boost its economy, then meritocracy is the way to go. It is dependent on the upward mobility and success of the few at the expense of the continued labor and downward mobility of the many to lift up the nation. It's this competition and nationalism that fuels Ms. Norman's love and appreciation for meritocracy.

However, she's missing a crucial aspect of meritocracy that's not often factored into how we calculate and predict success. Winners in meritocratic societies must believe that their successes are earned through talent and hard work. They must believe that their successes are morally justified (Sandel, 2020), and that requires they do not consider the conditions that produced the losers. According to Reynolds and Xian (2004), there are hidden non-meritocratic characteristics (eg., family wealth, family background, connection, community stability) factor into the success equation. In other words, we are more than one category; we live at an intersection of multiple societal systems and aspects of our identities. These shape the ways we interact with our spaces and the ways our spaces interact with us. Ms. Norman was lucky- even as a minority. Yet, to deny the existence of such advantages is to fully place the burden of economic and class mobility on the shoulders of the oppressed. You point at them and say "pull yourself up by the bootstraps," and some look down at their feet and find that they have no bootstraps...or boots. We ignore the unequal allocation of school resources, the availability of qualified teachers, robust classes, and community struggles that impact students. Again, these students become defined by their inability to succeed in a system that stacks the odds against them.

If meritocracy does not guarantee upward mobility for the majority of students, why continue struggling to succeed? The effort seems futile. Part of their adherence to meritocracy is

a desire to preserve a fair and just system (Wiederkehr, V et al., 2015). People in the low and high-status groups rely on this system because they see it as completely free of bias. They also look to the system for motivation as they have internalized that hard work is the key to success. To opt out of the game is to be left stranded in an economic no-mans-land because we have no alternative system. Meritocracy forces all parties to participate.

### **Meritocracy on Students**

Meritocracy directly impacts students because they spend significant portions of their time in the classroom, where they are the most vulnerable to its competitiveness. Students are first introduced to this system early in kindergarten through ability groupings. Ability grouping is the formation of “small, homogeneous groups within elementary school classrooms” (Loveless, 1998). This grouping method is particularly employed to divide students into different reading groups. Students are taught and defined by their ability to perform in class, and in turn, they begin to understand that they are in competition with themselves and with other students in the classroom; they need to be able to read and write better than their peers in hopes of receiving recognition and the accompanying resources. Students that are placed in the lower academic tracks have a hard time breaking out of their mold and into higher academic tracks well into their high school years. As they grow older, ability groupings are replaced by tracking, which “stratifies students by curriculum standards, educational career goals, or ability” (Werblow, J et al, 2013). Higher track students are placed in college prep courses, and lower track students are placed in general education, remedial or vocational courses (Werblow, J et al, 2013). Students on the lower track have limited access to instructional activities and are given less attention than those on the lower track. Meritocracy depends on an illusion of fairness, but tracking shatters this

illusion. As we'll find out shortly, it does not treat all students equally. Just like many other components of meritocracy, there are a few winners and many losers.

The first, arguably, the most immediate effect of tracking is the lack of self-esteem in students placed in the lower academic tracks. By placing students on different tracks, you publicly announce the student's perceived inability and intelligence to the rest of the class and to the rest of the school's student body. Students become defined by their academic groups. A student in a "high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving *person*, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, *good*. And those in the low-achieving group come to be called slow, below average, and- often when people are being less careful- dummies, sweatshops, or yahoos" (Oakes, 1985). Groupings can be a form of public embarrassment for students, especially if they are not moved to higher-achieving groups. I mentioned earlier that it is really difficult for students to change tracks once they've been assigned, and more often than not, students who change tracks are moved to lower-achieving groups. It's difficult for students that are deemed lazy and unintelligent to change their narratives. Research has found that students in lower academic tracks are more likely to drop out of school (Werblow, J et al, 2013). Lower-track students receive less attention and resources than their counterparts, leading to the perception that class instructions are uninteresting and low-quality. Students feel alienated from the rest of their school (Werblow, J et al, 2013).

Most of these students come from families and communities that are victims of social and economic inequalities, placing them at a disadvantage as people and students. Lower-class students are disproportionately placed in low-achieving classes, while middle and upper-class students are disproportionately represented in higher-achieving classes (Mickelson & Heath, 1999). Tracking is another tool that is used to maintain social hierarchies and reinforce systems

of inequality. Students who seem to have the “least of everything in the rest of their lives most often get less at school at well” (Oakes, 1985). This statement is especially true for African American students who are often at the intersection of multiple systemic violence and barriers. Like many other school districts, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district in North Carolina implemented tracking in their school practices. Mickelson and Heath found that African American students were overrepresented in their special education and “non-special” (1999) classes. On the other hand, higher track classes comprised 80%-100% of non-black students. They describe this phenomenon as a resegregation of education. The previous section discussed student mobility and the connection between economic, racial, and educational systems. Black students are victims of these systems; we cannot possibly boast about a fair meritocratic education system when so many students are shut out from participating based on their skin or economic background. Tracking contributes to this system by confirming society's screams of inferiority directed at black students.

## **Conclusion**

I began by detailing the rise of meritocracy in public schools because schools are where we are first introduced to this system. As kindergartners and elementary schoolers, American students are introduced to competition through ability groupings, transforming to tracking as they progress in their educational careers. Like many others, these systems ostracize minorities of color and economically disadvantaged populations. Meritocracy promotes upward mobility but only for the few winners, those who are fortunate and lucky enough to thrive. However, their mobility comes at the expense of the losers. Their success is only possible when those above them fall lower or stagnate.



I introduced this paper with a summary of my family's immigration to the United States because I wanted to juxtapose my experience with students who were born here. Although I was exposed to some meritocratic practices during my time in Nigeria, an immense sense of community still overshadowed the competition. We viewed immigrating away from Nigeria as a marker of success. However, after arriving here, we did not view our success solely as the product of our hard work. We recognized the community it took and the help we received as integral to our success. We were not in competition with one another. Perhaps it is because Nigeria is viewed as a “third-world” country, which means it has not been totally corrupted by meritocratic ideals. It is also important to note that I benefited from this system. I attended a charter middle and high school and was placed on a higher education track. I received more attention from my teachers and was given the opportunity to visit campus during college application season. Meritocracy is part of the reason why I attend Swarthmore.

Meritocracy is an inspirational economic tool fueled by misplaced hopes and dreams. It is a system that insists everyone participate because there are no mainstream alternatives. It is a system that has infiltrated our education and economic systems. It is a system whose message of fairness and equality is built upon the foundations of inequality and oppression. It is a full-proof system that has so masterfully convinced everyone- the winners and many losers- that it works and benefits everyone. Meritocracy is interesting because it manifests in most aspects of public life that we do not stop to realize that most of us are playing a competitive game within which we are at a disadvantage. It functions as a vacuum because we have to function with its parameters because there are no alternatives. We cannot opt out because we have bills and goals to accomplish. We live with the American Dream as the driving force behind our work as state residents, and behind this is a meritocracy- the promise of success.

If not a meritocracy, then what? Author Mike Ross stated, "safety, respect, expectation, opportunity, vitality, the intersection of heart and mind, the creation of civic spaces... should be our vocabulary of public schooling" (2009, 151). He mentions opportunity, which is one of the many languages that are exploited in schools. All the aforementioned vocabulary should be present in the classroom. By critically thinking about how we respect students and set expectations for them, we can move away from a system of individuality and competition to one that emphasizes community.

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