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What Americans Want from Public Schools

> Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation and Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, and Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare and Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing their tender Minds with Principles of Rectitude and Morality, [and] instructing them in . . . all useful Branches of liberal Arts and Science.
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> —*Benjamin Franklin, 1749*

> I do not see any way to achieve a good future for our children more effectively than debating together and working together on how we educate the next generation. Children may be about 20 percent of the population, but they are 100 percent of the future.
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> —*David Tyack, educational historian, 2001*[1]

Americans continue to follow the advice of Benjamin Franklin in making "the proper education of youth" the most important American social policy. Public education uses more resources and involves more people than any other government program for social welfare. It is the main activity of local governments and the largest single expenditure of almost all state governments. Education is the American answer to the European welfare state, to massive waves of immigration, and to demands for the abolition of subordination based on race, class, or gender.

Although public schools in the United States are expected to accomplish a lot for their students, underlying all of these tasks is the goal of creating the conditions needed for people to believe in and pursue the ideology of the American dream. Our understanding of the American dream is the common one,[2] described by President Clinton this way: "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you." The dream is the unwritten promise that all residents of the United

States have a reasonable chance to achieve success through their own efforts, talents, and hard work. Success is most often defined in material terms, but everyone gets to decide what it is for himself or herself. The first man to walk across Antarctica talks about this idea in the same way as people who make their first million: "The only limit to achievement," he said, "is the limit you place on your own dreams. Let your vision be guided by hope, your path be adventurous, and the power of your thoughts be directed toward the betterment of tomorrow."[3]

The American dream is a brilliant ideological invention, although, as we shall see, in practice it leaves much to be desired. Its power depends partly on the way it balances individual and collective responsibilities. The role of the government is to make the pursuit of success possible for everyone. This implies strict and complete nondiscrimination, universal education to provide the means for pursuing success, and protection for virtually all views of success, regardless of how many people endorse them. The state also has to create and preserve democratic institutions, including schools. Public schools must teach in ways that are broad enough to enable children to choose among alternative definitions of success, thorough enough to provide the skills they need to pursue their goals, and democratic enough to give them the habits and values needed to maintain the institutions and sustain the ideology of the dream. The polity, in short, has to create the conditions that make the dream appealing, possible, and viable for future generations.

Once the government provides this framework, individuals are on their own, according to the ideology. If schools teach the basics well, then there is no excuse for illiteracy; if schools provide civic education and democratic training, there is no excuse for bad citizenship. Put more positively, once the polity ensures a chance for everyone, it is up to individuals to go as far and fast as they can in whatever direction they choose. As President Clinton continued in the speech quoted above, "Most of all, we believe in individual responsibility *and* mutual obligation; that government must offer opportunity to all and expect something from all, and that whether we like it or not, we are all in this battle for the future together."

The direct question "Do you believe in the American dream?" elicits a positive response from at least three-fourths of the population.[4] People define the fruits of the dream in various ways, but almost all include enough money to care for themselves and their family, freedom and opportunity to choose their life course, good family relationships and friends, a meaningful job, and the feeling that they are "making or doing things that are useful to society."[5] Individual goals predominate in these surveys, but collective goals have strong support. Ninety percent of Americans agree that "equal opportunity for people regardless of their race, religion, or sex" is "absolutely essential" as an American ideal, and the same huge proportion agree that "our society should do what is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to suc-

ceed."[6] Questions measuring belief in democracy, diversity, and citizenship training also elicit strong support. Just as many young as old claim to "believe in the American dream," and those under 50 agree slightly more than those over 50 that our society should ensure everyone an equal opportunity to succeed.

Americans want the educational system to help translate the American dream from vision to practice. Campaign rhetoric, results from public opinion polls, and advertisements constantly make the connection. A recent ad for Amway Corporation, for example, featured a photogenic 13-year-old immigrant declaring that the American dream is "starting over, a new life. Exploring. And enjoying it!" To get there, he said, "you need hope. You have to know how to learn." President George W. Bush made the same point, less succinctly: "The quality of our public schools directly affects us all—as parents, as students, and as citizens. . . . If our country fails in its responsibility to educate every child, we're likely to fail in many other areas. But if we succeed in educating our youth, many other successes will follow throughout our country and in the lives of our citizens." Americans rank "prepar[ing] people to become responsible citizens" and "help[ing] people to become economically self-sufficient" highest among various possible purposes of public schooling.[7]

Schools are intended to benefit each person—as Benjamin Franklin put it, to provide "wisdom, riches, and strength, virtue and piety, welfare and happiness"—as well as to foster the "cultivation and improvement of a country." But even this is not all that Americans expect. At various points in American history and especially during the past decade, some people have also demanded that schools fulfill a third goal, satisfying the distinctive needs of particular groups. The desire to help some, even at the expense of one or all, rests on the belief that members of certain racial, ethnic, religious, or gender groups cannot be full participants in American society unless their group identity is publicly recognized and they are treated differently from other citizens. Sometimes members of a group believe that they cannot pursue their dreams unless they are separated from others profoundly different from themselves, and in a few cases group members reject the American dream altogether. For these reasons, for example, African American citizens obtained Afrocentric schools for black students in cities such as Milwaukee and Detroit, and the Plymouth Brethren Church in Michigan sought separate public school entrances, classrooms, and lunchrooms in order "to provide for the instruction and well-being of our children in the face of the continuing decline in moral judgment and values."[8] Most Americans, however, show little support for this goal, and it is the most controversial in practice. (Afrocentric schools have been picketed and threatened, and the Plymouth Brethren were denied their request.) Nevertheless, the goal of fostering the good of a particular group affects public schools out of proportion to its support because of the passion of its advocates and broader sympathy for their grievances.

For the last half century, controversies over education policy have largely resulted from the efforts of Americans to put all three goals into educational practice.[9] Most people believe in the two core goals and seek to balance or reconcile them, but different people place priority on one or the other. A few people place priority on helping a particular group that resists the American dream, and then citizens must weigh the dream against some other set of ideals. Some conflicts created by these multiple goals may reflect the contradictory or hypocritical views of individual Americans, but those are beyond our focus here. There is more than enough to concern us if we treat these disagreements as honest attempts to deal with competing values, as we will see when we look more closely at the goals themselves.

The Success of Individuals

Good schools should and can help individuals attain success. Virtually all Americans share that belief. Almost everyone sees the mastery of basic skills as the core of schooling, endorses teachers and principals who will "push students to . . . excel," and wants every student to be given a chance to complete high school.[10]

Beyond that, however, "success" has several meanings. It may be *absolute*—reaching some level of well-being higher than where one started. Absolute success is, in principle, available to everyone. In schooling it would consist in teaching all students some of the skills they need to live satisfactory adult lives, such as literacy and numeracy, the ability to find and use information, the ability to plan and discipline oneself, and the pleasure of exercising one's mind. For all individuals to achieve absolute success would be a triumph indeed; no society has attained it. Pursuing this goal can be controversial because it can require providing more educational resources to some students than others so that all may succeed regardless of initial talent or family resources.

For most people, however, absolute success is not enough. They seek *relative* success—attaining more than someone else such as one's parents or classmates. Relative success is egalitarian if it applies an equal standard of measurement to all, but it is not egalitarian in the sense that some individuals will do better than others. Most Americans assume that if schools are doing their job, their children will end up better off than their parents or most classmates. (They seldom consider the possibility of ending up worse off.)

Some parents go even farther and expect schools to provide their children with an advantage over other children. As one parent argued during a dispute in Boulder, Colorado, "No one active in his or her child's education . . . needs to apologize for trying to get what they want for their kid. . . . If the school district has a problem with that, so be it."[11] School district boundaries help to provide such an advantage when they follow neighborhood lines that separate

wealthy children from those who are poor and often nonwhite; school financing schemes have this effect when they are based on local property value and thereby create or maintain a privileged competitive position for wealthier children at the expense of the others. Tracking provides advantages when the best teachers or the most resources are devoted to a high track disproportionately filled with wealthier students. Such practices produce *competitive* success, in which the success of some implies the failure of the others. Competitive success may include an initially equal chance to seek victory, but beyond that starting point, opportunities are taken and advantages used, not redistributed to those with fewer.

Americans also disagree on what counts as success, and thus on what curricula and other school activities will help their students achieve it. In the view of some people, schools are supposed to nurture the thirst for knowledge while teaching students how to slake it. They share the Puritans' view that "the mind of man is a vast thing, it can take in, and swallow down Heaps of Knowledge, and yet is greedy after more; it can grasp the World in its conception." In a recent survey, three in five Americans in fact agreed that schools must seek "to increase people's happiness and enrich their lives culturally and intellectually." In the same survey, however, fully four out of five also agreed that "help[ing] people to become economically self-sufficient" was a very important purpose of public schools. In this view schools are supposed to give students the tools they need to improve their status. This is more in tune with Benjamin Franklin, for whom "the Encouragements to Learning are . . . great . . . [because] a poor Man's Son has a chance, if he studies hard, to rise . . . to gainful Offices or Benefices . . . and even to mix his Blood with Princes."[12] Most schools try to satisfy both views, to fulfill both purposes of education, but must constantly balance their competing demands. The ideology of the American dream is agnostic on what counts as success, but this very neutrality leads to controversy over appropriate policy choices.

The Collective Good

Achieving one's dream would not be possible past one generation, or for many even within the first generation, if the ideology of the American dream did not include prescriptions for pursuing collective goals.[13] Creating and maintaining even a flawed democracy is hard work. The framework of the American dream depends on more than transmitting knowledge and skills; it depends on teaching students how to be good citizens and to work together for the common good.

One collective goal holds that schools must help to *provide equal opportunity* for all children. As we show in later chapters, surveys and budget decisions alike show that most Americans now agree, at least in principle, that schools

should help offset the unfair disadvantages caused by disability, and should provide at least equal treatment to those with other difficulties such as those occasioned by poverty, lack of facility in English, or membership in a disfavored racial group. For some people this is a matter of simple justice and should not be controversial: "You'd be hard-pressed to find a single member of Congress who doesn't believe in full funding of IDEA [the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act]," says the Republican spokesman for the education committee of the House of Representatives. Others calculate that they do not want their children to have to confront the specter of second-class citizens and be asked to compensate for their social, economic, and political liabilities. A mother of an autistic child in California warns, "For the people who think, 'This is not my problem': it is. . . . We should spend our tax dollars in helping these families, not hindering their needs, so these children one day can be responsible tax-paying citizens, not burdens to our communities." [14]

To ensure that all can pursue their dreams, schools also have to help students acquire the *ability to deal with diverse others in the public arena.* Individual dreams and actions always vary and may conflict; schools need to teach people to respect the way other people view success. When our nation was founded, the most volatile dimensions of diversity were different Christian faiths and varying views of monarchical government. Since then, we have come to expect students to learn to cope with and even show consideration for visions of success affected by political views, class, region, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Most people now agree with George Washington, who "greatly wished to see a plan adopted . . . [which], by assembling the youth . . . Will contribut[e] . . . from their intercourse and interchange of information to the removal of prejudices"—in modern language, to teach mutual respect by having students learn in the same classroom with others unlike themselves.[15] That is why public schools have always been under great pressure to admit all students within their designated districts; private schools were permitted to be parochial and selective, but public schools were not. (The greatest exception to this pattern, as we will see, was racial segregation.) Many schools are now expected to teach through a multicultural curriculum so that children will not merely tolerate each other, but also understand and appreciate varying backgrounds and aspirations.

Americans also want schools to turn individuals into democratic citizens who will act so that the necessary political, social, and economic conditions persist for future generations to pursue *their* dreams.[16] "Sadly," wrote one columnist, "most American young people know little about their heritage of freedom, and have little grasp of the responsibilities of citizenship." At least 70 percent of Americans agree that schools must "teach such values as honesty, respect, and civility," that "the percentage of high school graduates who practice good citizenship" is a very important measure of schools' success, and that schools should teach that "democracy is the best form of government." Seven

out of ten endorse "requiring democracy education in Service and Civics as a graduation requirement" for all high school students.[17]

To turn students into democratic citizens, educators must provide students with *a common core of knowledge*. Americans abhor the (apocryphal?) boast of the French administrator that at 10:00 A.M. he could know just which page of Virgil all students of a certain age were construing throughout the nation. But they do generally agree that all students in the United States should end their schooling with some shared learning; almost all Americans agree that high school graduates must be able "to show they understand the common history and ideas that tie all Americans together."[18] Educators concur that graduates should not only know the outlines of American history, but also be able to communicate in English, be literate and arithmetically competent, and understand basic rules of politics and society, such as the purpose of elections and the meaning of the rule of law.

Closely allied with a common core of knowledge is the desire for students to graduate with a *common set of democratic values and practices*. After all, as the great sociologist Emil Durkheim put it, "School is the only moral agent through which the child is able systematically to learn to know and love his country. It is precisely this fact that lends pre-eminent significance to the part played by the school . . . in the shaping of national morality." The idea of common values can be controversial; nevertheless, almost two-thirds of people in the United States think schools must "promote cultural unity among all Americans" (and most of the rest think they should do so). More tellingly, studies of community meetings consistently find that "discussion of citizenship values . . . —the values and behaviors which are at the very core of the practice of democracy— . . . have the greatest potential for creating common ground" even among people bitterly divided over policy goals, according to a scholar at Northeastern University in Boston.[19] Americans typically want students to acquire political values such as loyalty to the nation, a belief in the rule of law and the Constitution, and an appreciation that rights sometimes trump majority rule and majority rule sometimes overrules intense desire. They want students to acquire social values such as the work ethic, self-reliance, and trustworthiness, and they want them also to acquire democratic habits like following fair rules, negotiating rather than using violence to secure their desires, respecting those who disagree, taking turns, expressing their views persuasively, organizing with others for change, competing fairly, and winning (or losing) gracefully. They also want students to incorporate, and practice, the tenets of the American dream itself.[20]

As with the pursuit of all three forms of individual success, these collective commitments have never been fully achieved for all students. Strong efforts to promote one or several of the community-oriented goals are likely to conflict with strong efforts to promote others of them; schools that focus on teaching all students a core curriculum, for example, may not be very adept at

teaching students how to be active democratic citizens, and vice versa. But the deepest dilemmas for public schools lie not within but between the individual and collective goals for the schools, despite the fact that the goals for one and all are paired elements of the ideology of the American dream. And both core goals can conflict with a third, more contentious, demand focused on the special conditions of some.

The Welfare of Groups

Particular groups make claims to distinctive treatment in schools for two reasons. First, those acting on behalf of children who were treated unfairly because of some shared characteristic have demanded the right to have the group recognized and treated differently, so that in the end all groups will end up with equal opportunity for schooling. In the nineteenth century, reformers made the radical claim that girls deserved access to public schooling as much as boys did, and a few even asserted that African Americans or Native Americans had the same right. In the mid-twentieth century, *Brown v. Board of Education* held that black children in a public education system had a constitutional right to participate on the same terms as white children. This demand for equal opportunity, inclusion, and respect fits squarely within the American dream.

At other times, however, people have insisted that a particular group must be treated *differently* if it is to get an equal education. In some cases this has meant separate schooling within the public system to fit the group's perspectives, in others changing the practices of existing schools in deference to the group. In the nineteenth century, Catholic leaders protested the Protestant pedagogy of the new "public" schools; if schools would not be religiously neutral, they should teach Catholic doctrine to Catholic children or provide funds for a parallel system of Catholic schools. A century later, some people call for separate, extended bilingual education to help immigrant children maintain their native culture. Some African Americans argue that only if members of their race run their schools or only if curricula are designed specifically for their children will blacks enjoy the same autonomy, respect, and cultural self-definition that whites have always had.

Whether claims for differential treatment fit comfortably within the ideology of the American dream depends on the specific views of the claimants. To the degree, for example, that Afrocentrists are motivated by a rejection of European-American values, their separatism will be in opposition to the ideology of the dream. To the degree, conversely, that proponents believe that immigrant children will best achieve their dreams as Americans by learning in their native language, they may fit within the flexible boundaries of the ideology. But a strong demand that one group's identity be respected is highly volatile. Sooner or later (probably sooner), it is likely to be discordant with the

demands of other groups; it is certain to conflict at some point with the priorities of the majority who remain focused on the core collective and individual goals.

The Goals in Practice

Americans who have thought most carefully about the purposes of public education have generally believed, in accord with the American dream, that neither core goal should supersede the other. Thomas Jefferson offered six "objects of primary education" that included both goals in order "to instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests, and duties, as men and citizens." The first three objects identify types of individual success: "to give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business"; "to enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing"; and "to improve, by reading, his morals and faculties." Two focus on participation in the public arena: "to understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either"; and "to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed." The final one combines both goals: "to know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment."[21] Jefferson used these principles to design an elaborate system of public elementary and secondary education for all (white, male) children of Virginia. It was to be publicly subsidized for those who could not afford it.

Almost 200 years later, the Supreme Court echoed Jefferson in a court case called *Plyler v. Doe*: the American people "have recognized 'the public schools as a most vital civic institution for the preservation of a democratic system of government,' and as the primary vehicle for transmitting 'the values on which our society rests.' . . . In addition, education provides the basic tools by which individuals might lead economically productive lives." More recent court cases use similar language. "[A] thorough and efficient [education] means more than teaching the skills needed in the labor market," said the New Jersey supreme court in a landmark 1990 decision on school finance. "It means being able to fulfill one's role as a citizen, a role that encompasses far more than merely registering to vote."[22]

Some school practices can in fact foster the two basic values, or even all three, simultaneously. Helping students to learn as much as they can both enables them to pursue their dreams and increases the chance that the brightest will benefit the nation through discoveries, insights, or leadership. Ensuring that all students are verbally and mathematically competent helps them to live satisfying lives at the same time that it makes them better democratic citizens.

Teaching immigrant students to speak English makes them more likely to succeed in mainstream society and reinforces the cultural core so essential to a huge and diverse democracy. Showing respect for those outside the racial or cultural mainstream encourages them to pursue their own distinctive dreams while broadening the sensibilities of all students. Providing resources to incorporate children with disabilities in regular classrooms might be the best way to offset their disadvantages as well as to teach other students to accommodate difference.

In the day-to-day practice of schooling, however, fostering what is good for all may divert resources from one or some; what shows respect for the identity of some may violate the convictions of others or reduce the commitment of students to the common core; what encourages success for the brightest or luckiest may deny opportunity for the slowest or unluckiest. When priorities must be determined—under pressure from demographic change, political demands, fiscal limits, global competition, competing values, or fear—one goal or another is likely to win out.

Previous trade-offs themselves shape the context within which new choices must be made. In the first decades of the last century, many citizens saw immigration as a frightening challenge to the American way of life and demanded that schools be transformed in order to "Americanize" these future citizens. In the 1950s anxieties about the Soviet Union led to a focus on enhancing achievement for the apparently brightest students. By the 1960s emphasis shifted to creating equality of opportunity. In the 1980s, with many people fearing economic challenges from abroad and reduced opportunities for success at home, attention shifted again to individual achievement and parents engaged in ever more intense competition for advantage in educational or fiscal resources. Most recently demands for group respect that started as a drive for integration in the 1960s have sometimes been transformed into advocacy for separate schools or distinct treatment within common schools.

Regardless of the motivations behind each movement, the combination of multiple goals, competing interests, and a fragmented governance structure has often made policies incoherent and decisions unstable. As one goal takes precedence and then is replaced by another, some policies, institutions, and practices continue to function well in the new environment. Others, however, become relics that create an inappropriate policy emphasis, use a disproportionate amount of resources, or otherwise distort the system. Too much bureaucracy may remain from Progressive era attempts to deal with demographic change; too much willingness to accept inequality, or to jettison public schooling entirely, may be the legacy of fear of international competition from the 1980s; too much separatism may be the consequence of the newest demand for group rights and respect. Each particular goal fits within, or at least need not contradict, the overall ideology of the American dream. But they can get in each other's way and generate intense conflict when priorities have to

be set. In particular, the individual goals too often take precedence over the collective goals, as we shall demonstrate over the next five chapters.

The Centrality of Public Education

The intensity of conflicts over how to balance shared but competing goals is a good barometer of how much Americans care about public education. They care so much, as we have said, because education is at the core of the dominant American ideology; it is essential both to create the democratic structure of which Americans are so proud and to provide the tools for the success that Americans seek so passionately. By no coincidence education is also a huge public undertaking, and the size of the enterprise itself increases the opportunities for disagreement, raises the stakes, and heightens the level of concern.

Because the United States does not provide the kind of family support, employment assistance, health insurance, or public child care available in France or Germany or Sweden, social scientists often describe America as a welfare laggard. In those countries these services were established sooner, encompass more of the population, and absorb more of the national wealth than in the United States. But the United States is a welfare leader with regard to schooling; here public schools started earlier and have always included more people and taken a larger share of resources. This difference in approach reflects a crucial difference in ideology. Europeans believe more strongly that the state should ensure a decent standard of living for all its citizens; Americans believe more strongly that it is the duty of the state to provide opportunity and then the job of each citizen to earn an appropriate standard of living.[23]

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States' elementary school enrollment rate was roughly double that of every European country except Germany. By the turn of the twentieth century, when the largest European nations had caught up to the United States in early schooling, the United States began to move ahead on high schools. As two Harvard economists point out, "When, during World War II, President Roosevelt formulated the GI Bill of Rights to fund college for millions of Americans, his counterpart in Great Britain, Prime Minister Churchill, was given a bill that granted youth the right to free secondary school education."[24] By now virtually all developed nations have caught up to or even passed the United States in secondary schooling, but Americans are still more likely to attain higher education than are residents of most other countries. Just over a quarter of adult Americans have completed college, compared with only 14 percent of Germans, 9 percent of Italians, and 19 percent of Canadians.[25]

The United States remains one of the highest spenders on education even as its rank in spending on other social welfare policies has slipped over the past few decades. In fact, the United States ranks higher than all but three nations

(Denmark, Switzerland, and Austria) in annual expenditures per K-12 student. In choosing to spend so much on schooling, American policymakers are acting exactly in accord with public preferences; education is the only issue in the arena of social welfare policies for which Americans are much more supportive than residents of other welfare states.[26] Americans are also much more likely than Europeans to rank as "essential" almost any school subject that they are asked to evaluate. They are especially focused on skills needed for individual achievement, but they also want schools to teach citizenship skills more than do Europeans.[27] Americans pay a lot for education, and they expect a lot.

Schools in the United States absorb a huge share of the nation's public outlay of funding, employment, and contracting. In 1999, almost seven million people held full- or part-time jobs in public elementary and secondary schools; they constitute more than half of all local governmental employees.[28] This also represents a large share of all the jobs in many cities; public schools are the second-largest employment sector in Los Angeles County and Gary, Indiana, and the largest employer in Baltimore.[29] Since most public school employees are highly organized, and since policy choices have high stakes for them, schooling can involve all of the special-interest advocacy, all the lobbying, and all the political maneuvering of any other big business.

And schooling is big business. *Fortune* magazine publishes an annual list of the largest companies in the United States; if the public school system of California alone were one of those companies, it would rank twenty-second. That is slightly higher than Metropolitan Life Insurance and slightly lower than Hewlett-Packard. About 47 million children are in public K-12 schools, almost 90 percent of the school-age children in the United States. In 2001, it cost about $390 billion a year from all sources to educate them—more than defense and not too much less than social security.[30] Almost a quarter of all state expenditures go to K-12 schools.[31]

Unlike in other comparable nations, education in the United States is intensely local. There are over 92,000 public schools, located in almost 15,000 school districts in every community in the country. Districts are governed by local board members who are either elected or appointed by elected officials. America's geographic and demographic diversity, its citizens' distrust of central government, its preference for local democracy, and the grassroots origin and development of its public schools have led to this fragmented and decentralized educational governance system. The Supreme Court has provided its most elegant justification: "The public educator's task is weighty and delicate indeed. It demands particularized and supremely subjective choices among diverse curricula, moral values, and political stances to teach or inculcate in students, and among various methodologies for doing so. Accordingly, we have traditionally reserved the 'daily operation of school systems' to the states and their local school boards." [32] In the early 1990s, 60 percent of Americans agreed that it is "very important for educational decisions to be made by the schools

themselves"; in the other member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, the most developed nations), comparable percentages ran from 17 in Spain to 49 in France and Portugal.[33]

Local districts raise almost half the money used to support schools, and most of the rest comes from state revenues. In contrast to most other nations, unlike most other social policies in the United States, and despite the claims of presidents and presidential candidates, the federal government is not a major actor here; it provides only 8 percent of the money spent on schools and dedicates barely 2 percent of its budget to schooling. At this level it can issue mandates for change and provide some help, but it cannot implement programs or provide services that make a difference to a large number of students; states and local districts have to do those things.

In this context conflicts over educational policies, priorities, and practice are inevitable. Because schooling is so central to cherished values in this country, people care intensely about the outcome of educational disputes; because it is so expensive, powerful interest groups have high stakes in the way disputes are resolved. Public officials at three or four levels of government often have different views of the same policy problem; school officials in thousands of districts are affected differently by the solutions. Since school district boundaries are so deeply entangled in patterns of race and class, issues of educational inequality and separation are volatile and sometimes intractable. It is, however, the structure of inequality in the United States that presents the most direct educational challenge to the American dream.

The Structure of Inequality in Education

Some schools provide a first-rate education. But some are terrible: "For years, it was like storming the Bastille every day," says one urban teacher.[34] Some schools are blessed with well-fed children; others struggle to teach children who lack the basic amenities. In some districts virtually all students are at least second-generation Americans; in others many of the students have recently immigrated from dozens of nations. Some districts have their pick of the best teachers; others count themselves lucky to have any warm body in front of the classrooms come September. Huge disparities in education spending persist, and some states or districts spend twice as much as others.

In Newton North High School in Massachusetts, the students are mostly affluent and white. Ninety-nine percent graduate, 88 percent take the SATs, 80 percent plan to attend a four-year college, 32 students were National Merit finalists or semifinalists in one year, and an additional 45 won National Merit letters of commendation. The school offers courses in 5 languages (as well as English as a second language), 14 Advanced Placement or college credit courses, and 34 fine arts courses. It has 3 student-run publications, 26 sports teams, and

a wide variety of other extracurricular programs ranging from Amnesty International to a ski club and ROTC. Students at Newton North have the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

On the other side of the country, a school in San Diego presents a different picture. Ninety percent of the children in this school are poor, 40 percent have limited English proficiency, many move frequently. A third of the teachers are brand new, and two of the twenty are out on "stress disability" leave. A recent evaluation of the school found that it needed a nurse, a counselor, facilities for parents and preschool children, and an adult literacy program. The principal claims that "we've pulled together, and we're going to do the best we can,"[35] but her chances of success seem slim. The children in her school will probably have little chance to pursue their dreams.

This kind of variation across students and districts is not random; students live in a system of nested inequalities. The first level is statewide. Students' educational outcomes depend a lot on which state they are born in. Children in Massachusetts, like those in Iowa, New Jersey, or North Dakota, have more than a 50 percent likelihood of enrolling in college by age 19, but children in Florida, Arizona, Alaska, and Nevada have less than a 30 percent chance. The discrepancy in college attendance by state is even greater for children from low-income families.[36] In 1998–1999, schools in Massachusetts spent an average of $8,750 per student, schools in New Jersey over $10,700. But schools in California spent only $6,050 per student, and those in Utah just under $4,500. Fewer than 3 percent of students in Iowa, North Dakota, and Wisconsin drop out of school; more than 7 percent do in Louisiana, Arizona, Georgia, New Mexico, and Nevada. Overall, in fact, at least 30 percent of the variation in students' achievement is related to the state in which they live.[37]

Inequalities within a state can be just as great as those between the states. Newton is a high-spending district even for Massachusetts. In neighboring Connecticut the school district that spends the most per pupil provides almost twice as much funding as the district that spends the least. Districts vary a lot both in available resources and student needs; the poorest town in Connecticut has 150 times as many poor students as the wealthiest town. These differences have consequences for schooling outcomes. The district with the highest scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test does almost three times as well as the district with the lowest scores. In one district 40 percent of high school students drop out before graduating, but in others none do. In some districts almost all students continue their education beyond high school, but in others fewer than half do.[38]

In Connecticut as in other states, many, although not all, of these indicators of advantage or disadvantage are highly correlated. Districts with a lot of poor students have lower average test scores and higher dropout rates; districts with a lot of minority students, or a lot whose native language is not English, also have lower average test scores. (These districts are often the same.) The

highest-spending districts report high test scores, and some of the lowest-spending districts report the lowest test scores, although the pattern in the middle-wealth districts is less clear.[39]

Schools vary greatly even within districts. In California in 1990, schools varied more within a given district than they did across districts as a whole. In Yonkers, New York, the subject of an important lawsuit over school and housing desegregation, schools in the city's northern and eastern section were built relatively recently and have beautiful grounds and excellent facilities; some schools in its southwestern section were built a century ago and have tiny playgrounds of cracked and slanted cement (or none at all) and dismal laboratories and libraries. In New York City, funding for regular students in elementary and middle schools varied by several thousand dollars per student in the late 1990s; per capita operating funds were particularly low in schools with many poor or immigrant students. In some New York grade schools, almost all of the teachers are certified, and in a few the pupil/teacher ratio is well below ten; in others only two out of five teachers are certified, or the ratio of students to teachers is close to 20. Schools with a lot of poor students or limited English speakers had significantly fewer certified teachers and higher student/teacher ratios. In some New York schools, most students perform at least at the fiftieth percentile in reading tests, but in others barely one-seventh do.[40]

Finally, the classes taken within a school matter a lot. Most high schools sort students by perceived or measured ability, and well-off children almost always dominate the high groups. Children with disabilities or students with limited English proficiency are not likely to be in high-ability groups regardless of their actual abilities. Typically the best teachers, the smallest classes, and the most resources go to the high groups, and to mainstream or English-speaking classes.

Students therefore sit at the center of four or more nested structures of inequality and separation—states, districts, schools, classes, and special needs. Well-off or white parents usually manage to ensure that their children obtain the benefits of this structure; poor and non-Anglo parents have a much harder time doing so.

Inequalities in family wealth are a major cause of inequalities in schooling, and inequalities of schooling do much to reinforce inequalities of wealth among families in the next generation—that is the intergenerational paradox described in the introduction. The effects are far-reaching; by the 1980s economic class mattered as much as race or ethnicity in determining who attended a four-year college, and who was admitted to the most selective among them.[41] The effects may even be increasing. Parents' income became less important in determining how much schooling a child received until roughly 1980, but its impact has grown since then. For example, 29 percent of the poorest quarter of high school graduates enrolled in a four-year college in the early 1980s, compared with 55 percent of the richest quarter. By a decade later, however, the

proportion of poor students who enrolled in college had declined marginally while the proportion of the well-off who enrolled had increased considerably, to 66 percent.[42]

Class differences affect not only college attendance but also basic reading ability. A recent literacy test in OECD nations revealed that the gap between the best and worst readers was wider in the United States than anywhere else; the bottom fifth in America read more poorly than the bottom fifth in every other nation except Canada.[43]

Outcomes of schooling increasingly matter because they are becoming linked more closely to a person's financial and political success. In 1979 college-educated men who worked full time earned 29 percent more than full-time workers with only a high school diploma; by 1998 that gap had increased to 68 percent. (Among women the comparable wage gap increased from 43 percent to 79 percent.) Over this period men who graduated from college enjoyed real wage gains of 8 percent, but men who only graduated from high school *lost* 18 percent of what they would have earned formerly. The wage gap is growing in most nations, but in almost all cases at a lower rate than in the United States. In the late 1990s, only Portugal, Hungary, and the Czech Republic among OECD nations showed greater inequality than the United States between earnings of high school dropouts and earnings of college graduates.[44]

California provides a good example of how much more schooling matters now than it used to. In 1969 dropouts earned about $31,000; by 1996 their wages had dropped to $17,000—a loss of almost half their yearly earnings. But workers with a postgraduate degree saw their incomes rise from about $58,000 in 1969 to about $73,000 27 years later—a gain of about a quarter.[45] That is a big difference in both directions.

Education also powerfully affects people's involvement with politics and their community, thereby creating another link between the nested structure of inequalities in schooling and the American dream. As one of our nation's foremost scholars of political participation concludes, "The best predictor of political activity is education. . . . Education fosters activity through its effect on information, skills, values, resources, networks, and more. No wonder it is so potent. Furthermore, the potency grows after education ends." Well-educated citizens, not surprisingly, show greater understanding of the principles of democratic government than others. They are better able to identify local and national leaders and more likely to know current political facts. They pay much closer attention to political life and are more tolerant of those with unpopular political views. They are also much more likely to vote than those with little education; the disparity in voting between high school dropouts and graduates has widened since the 1960s.[46] The relationship between education and the likelihood of engaging in political activity is, in fact, closer in the United States than in almost all other industrialized democracies.[47]

Education, then, makes a difference in realizing both core goals of the American dream, in some ways more than ever. The deep and growing structural inequalities embedded in the system represent a powerful challenge to its realization.

The Biggest Challenge

Not surprisingly, the structure of nested inequalities creates the worst problems in the schools in large, poor central cities (and in some small rural schools as well). In the 100 largest school districts, almost 70 percent of the students are non-Anglo (compared with 40 percent of students nationally), and over half are poor or near-poor (compared with fewer than 40 percent nationally).[48] Cities often have fewer resources to help those students than do wealthier suburbs. They have larger schools and larger classes, as well as less adequate buildings, classrooms, and technology. Compared with suburban districts, teachers in city schools are less likely to be certified or to have studied in the areas that they teach, have less experience, and are more likely to leave before the end of the school year. These schools suffer from much more administrative and behavioral turmoil and have a higher level of disruption, violence, and anxiety about safety. All of the districts with high dropout rates are in large cities. Urban children have much lower test scores than nonurban children, and they perform less well on measures of civic training.[49] For young non-Anglo men in Philadelphia in the 1990s, attending a neighborhood public high school rather than a magnet school had a "devastating effect" on their incomes as adults, according to two urban sociologists. It is not hard to see why when we listen to the ruling of the trial court in the ongoing school finance case in New York City:

> City public school students' graduation/dropout rates and performance on standardized tests demonstrate that they are not receiving a minimally adequate education. This evidence becomes overwhelming when coupled with the extensive evidence, discussed above, of the inadequate resources provided the City's public schools. The majority of the City's public school students leave high school unprepared for more than low-paying work, unprepared for college, and unprepared for the duties placed upon them by a democratic society. The schools have broken a covenant with students and with society.[50]

In short, the worst-off students and schools have a completely different educational experience from the best-off, and the outcomes are predictably very different. Those differences are growing, and racial and class inequalities remain intertwined. During the 1970s and 1980s, the gap in the quality of schools attended by blacks and whites worsened, entirely because poor inner-city schools and schools with fewer than 20 percent of whites deteriorated so much. In fact, black students in nonurban schools actually did better during this

period, even while black students in urban schools were doing worse. Similarly, during the 1990s, the most accomplished quarter of fourth grade readers improved their test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), while the least accomplished quarter lost even more ground. The top scorers were mostly white, the low scorers were disproportionately black and Latino boys in poor urban schools.[51]

Class disparities among school districts are growing as communities and even whole regions become more economically homogeneous. In 1970 the typical affluent American lived in a neighborhood where two-fifths of the residents were also affluent; 20 years later that figure had climbed to over half. Conversely, the proportion of poor people living in poor neighborhoods in inner cities has increased. In the two decades after 1970, in every one of 48 cities in the largest metropolitan areas, from the poorest in comparison to its suburbs (Hartford, Connecticut) to the wealthiest (Greensboro, North Carolina), the disparity in wealth between city and suburbs grew worse.[52] Most importantly here, in the decade after 1982 economic disparities between school districts rose, whether measured by household income, poverty rates, or rates of housing vacancy. There remains a close relationship between the number of poor people and the number of African Americans and Hispanics in a community. Nevertheless, separation by income has grown substantially in American communities during the same decades that separation by race and ethnicity has declined, at about the same rate.[53]

High and growing economic similarity within communities undermines the collective goals of the American dream for all students as well as individual goals for students in poor districts. It makes it much more difficult, in many cases impossible given district boundaries, for poor students to be educated with middle-class students. They therefore miss out on the good facilities and high-quality teachers that students in middle-class districts are more likely to enjoy, and they are denied the benefits of middle-class peers. That is a severe loss; one of the few things we know for certain about schooling is that the class background of a student's classmates has a dramatic effect on that student's level of success. The sociologist James Coleman said it first and best almost 40 years ago: "A pupil's achievement is strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students in the school. . . . [C]hildren from a given family background, when put in schools of different social compositions, will achieve at quite different levels." This finding has been documented over and over in various countries and schools and with different methodologies and sets of data. In one dramatic example, well-off students in mostly poor schools performed worse on reading tests than did poor students in mostly middle-class schools.[54] Direct efforts to integrate poor and better-off students, nevertheless, have been few and far between and have proven very difficult to accomplish.[55]

It is the schools attended mostly by poor, disproportionately black and Latino, urban children that provide the evidence for those who see an educational crisis in the United States, and the schools of the more affluent, mostly white, children that provide most of the success stories. Despite Americans' belief in the collective goals of public education, and despite the importance of those goals to maintaining the American dream, disparities in outcomes among schools may have worsened in recent years even as absolute levels of educational attainment and achievement have improved. In the words of one careful urban sociologist, "Whether intentional or not, the process [of class concentration] represents a retreat from the concept of community and has very serious long-run implications for American society."[56] Those implications begin in school.