

INTRODUCTION

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

—President George W. Bush, 2000

There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.

—President Bill Clinton, 1993

THE AMERICAN DREAM IS A POWERFUL CONCEPT. It encourages each person who lives in the United States to pursue success, and it creates the framework within which everyone can do it. It holds each person responsible for achieving his or her own dreams, while generating shared values and behaviors needed to persuade Americans that they have a real chance to achieve them. It holds out a vision of both individual success and the collective good of all.

From the perspective of the individual, the ideology is as compelling as it is simple. “I am an American, so I have the freedom and opportunity to make whatever I want of my life. I can succeed by working hard and using my talents; if I fail, it will be my own fault. Success is honorable, and failure is not. In order to make sure that my children and grandchildren have the same freedom and opportunities that I do, I have a responsibility to be a good citizen—to respect those whose vision of success is different from my own, to help make sure that everyone has an equal chance to succeed, to participate in the democratic process, and to teach my children to be proud of this country.”

Not all residents of the United States believe all of those things, of course, and some believe none of them. Nevertheless, this American dream is surprisingly close to what most Americans have believed through most of recent American history.

Public schools are where it is all supposed to start—they are the central institutions for bringing both parts of the dream into practice. Americans expect schools not only to help students reach their potential as individuals but



also to make them good citizens who will maintain the nation's values and institutions, help them flourish, and pass them on to the next generation. The American public widely endorses both of these broad goals, values public education, and supports it with an extraordinary level of resources.

Despite this consensus Americans disagree intensely about the education policies that will best help us achieve this dual goal. In recent years disputes over educational issues have involved all the branches and levels of government and have affected millions of students. The controversies—over matters like school funding, vouchers, bilingual education, high-stakes testing, desegregation, and creationism—seem, at first glance, to be separate problems. In important ways, however, they all reflect contention over the goals of the American dream. At the core of debates over one policy or another has often been a conflict between what is (or seems to be) good for the individual and what is good for the whole; sometimes the conflict revolves around an assault on the validity of the dream itself by certain groups of people. Because education is so important to the way the American dream works, people care about it intensely and can strongly disagree about definitions, methods, and priorities.

Sustained and serious disagreements over education policy can never be completely resolved because they spring from a fundamental paradox at the heart 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 talent, effort, or ambition. The American dream is egalitarian at the starting point in the "race of life," but not at the end. That is not the paradox; it is simply an ideological choice. The paradox stems from the fact that the success of one generation depends at least partly on the success of their parents or guardians. People who succeed get to keep the fruits of their labor and use them as they see fit; if they buy a home in a place where the schools are better, or use their superior resources to make the schools in their neighborhood better, their children will have a head start and other children will fall behind through no fault of their own. The paradox lies in the fact that 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 advantage in attaining wealth or power, and some can do it. When they do, everyone does not start equally, politically or economically. This circle cannot be squared.

Many issues in education policy have therefore come down to an apparent choice between the individual success of comparatively privileged students and the collective good of all students or the nation as a whole. Efforts to promote the collective goals of the American dream through public schooling have run up against almost insurmountable barriers when enough people believe (rightly or wrongly, with evidence or without) that those efforts will endanger the comparative advantage of their children or children like them. At that point a gap

arises between their belief that every child deserves a quality education and their actions to benefit their own children over the long run.

Because most Americans now believe that the American dream should be available to all American citizens, public schools in the United States have made real progress toward enabling everyone to pursue success as they understand it. Compared with a few decades ago, dropout rates have fallen, achievement scores have risen, resources are more equally distributed, children with disabilities have the right to an appropriate education, and black children are not required by law to attend separate and patently inferior schools.

Yet this progress has met limits. Hispanics and inner city residents still drop out much more frequently than others, the gap between black and white achievement rose during the 1990s after declining in the previous decade, the achievement gap between students from lower- and higher-class families has barely budged, and poor students in poor urban schools have dramatically lower rates of literacy and arithmetic or scientific competence. Most importantly, life chances depend increasingly on attaining higher education, but class background is as important as ever in determining who attends and finishes a four-year college.

The gap between belief and action has emerged in different school districts at different times over different issues; education policy has therefore been not only contentious but confusing. Policymakers have pursued, with considerable support, one goal or set of goals for a while and then stopped or shifted emphasis; some policymakers have pursued a direction in one jurisdiction while their counterparts elsewhere have moved strongly in another. Some schools and districts seized upon orders to desegregate as an opportunity to institute desired reforms; others fought all efforts at desegregation and sought to minimize the changes it entailed. Some districts and states embrace public school choice and charter schools; others (or the same ones under different leadership) resist or ignore them. Some districts focus on basic skills while neighboring districts emphasize the teaching of higher-order thinking.

The gap between beliefs and actions not only leads to contention and confusion, it also generates policies that are irrational in the sense that they are inconsistent with evidence of what works or are not based on any evidence at all. At times policymakers have abandoned proven reforms or have promoted them only over stiff opposition. Desegregation enhanced the long-term life chances of many African American students and rarely hurt white students, but the movement to complete or maintain it has largely been over for 25 years. School finance reform broadens schooling opportunities for poor children without harming those who are better off, but equity in funding has depended mostly on the intervention of the courts. At other times policymakers have adopted reforms for which there is no empirical support or on the basis of conflicting assessments. There is at best mixed evidence of the benefits of separating stu-

dents according to academic achievement or language ability, but the former is almost universal and the latter is widespread. And charter schools or private school choice programs have been widely advocated without convincing evidence that they make any difference at all.

Irrational policymaking can be explained by the fact that public officials have made their choices at least partly on the basis of claims that pursuing collective goals of the American dream could endanger or has endangered the individual achievement of privileged children. Under pressure they have been willing to sacrifice the wider objectives or put them at risk for the sake of the narrower ones, whether or not there was good evidence that the objectives really were 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 demonstrated to help disadvantaged children achieve, just as they enable middle-class children to achieve. Similarly, it helps all children to have peers who take school seriously, behave in ways that help them learn, and are backed by parents who have the resources to ensure that schools satisfactorily educate their children. Most importantly, 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 send them to schools with wealthier children, or they can, as a reasonable second best, seek to give them an education in their own neighborhood that has the features of schooling for well-off students. The former has proved so far 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 those things enough to make them actually happen.

Decisions about schooling also take place in a context that makes it hard to change anything and especially difficult to alter the structure of privilege. Unlike schooling in every other major industrialized country, public education in this country is democratic and deeply local. Despite the rhetoric of presidential candidates, it is not the federal government but states and localities that carry most of the burden of public education. Until recently local property taxes provided the bulk of the financing for public schools, and local officials still make most decisions about personnel and pedagogy. School assignments for students are based on local district or community residence; when com-

munities are divided not only by geography but also by race and class, as they are in much of the United States, the schools will mirror these divisions.

Americans want neighborhood schools, decentralized decision making, and democratic control. They see these devices in part as ways to ensure that schools can accommodate distinctive community desires, and to give parents a greater say about what goes on in them. Despite the fact that participation in school elections is very low and information on which to base a vote is often scarce, Americans will not surrender local control without a fight. They simply will not permit distant politicians or experts in a centralized civil service to make educational decisions. The reasons for this preference are complicated, including the incredible diversity of the population and the huge size of the country. Not least important, however, is the fact that local districts mirror and reinforce separation by class and race. Democratic control, therefore, not only provides support for public education but also creates a forum for the occasional exercise of bigotry and xenophobia; localism not only accommodates community idiosyncrasies but also serves as a barrier to changes in the distribution of students and resources.

As these observations about localism suggest, the gap between belief in the American dream and its practice has demographic and historical as well as individual and structural causes. In the United States, class is connected with race and immigration; the poor are disproportionately African Americans or recent immigrants, especially from Latin America. Legal racial discrimination was abolished in American schooling during the last half century (an amazing accomplishment in itself), but prejudice and racial hierarchy remain, and racial or ethnic inequities reinforce class disparities. This overlap adds more difficulties to the already difficult relationship between individual and collective goals of the American dream, in large part because it adds anxieties about diversity and citizenship to concerns about opportunity and competition. The fact that class and race or ethnicity are so intertwined and so embedded in the structure of schooling may provide the greatest barrier of all to the achievement of the dream for all Americans, and helps explain much of the contention, confusion, and irrationality in public education.

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 results 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. <--- STOP HERE

The first chapter of this book expands on the themes we have introduced here; it more closely examines the dilemmas created by the American dream, the education system in which those dilemmas must be addressed, and the structures