

Just Education? The Education Reform Movement
and its Curious Vision for a Fairer and More Egalitarian United States

by

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Introduction: Why Is Education Reform So Important?

I. Education Reform: The Civil Rights Issue of Our Day?

The spokespersons for the education reform movement in the contemporary United States have gained near celebrity-status, with philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates, Harlem Children Zone founder Geoffrey Canada, and reform-oriented educational administrators such as Michele Rhee (former Chancellor of Washington D.C.'s public schools) and Joel Klein (former head of the New York City School system) garnering regular mass media attention. The image of a proud Michelle Rhee displayed on the front page of *Time Magazine*, with the caption "How To Fix America's Schools," exemplifies the importance of the "education reformers" in today's policy discourse.¹ This "education reform movement" is an elite-driven, diverse network of actors. By "education reformers" I refer to policy advocates, foundation executives, politicians, and economic elites, who describe the United States' K-12 educational system as being in a state of crisis. They believe that by introducing "data-driven," market mechanisms that promote efficiency and "measurable outcomes," previously failing urban school districts can become engines for promoting equality of opportunity, and that our schools can and must prepare our children to work competitively in the 21st-century "knowledge" economy.

The education reformers repeatedly claim that "education is the civil rights issue of our day." Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made such a remark in January 2011 speaking at the Reverend Al Sharpton's National Action Network's

¹ "How To Fix America's Schools," *Time Magazine*, December 8, 2008, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20081208,00.html>.

Martin Luther King Jr. day prayer breakfast: “I’m convinced education is the civil rights issue of our generation and we have a lot of hard work ahead of us. If we want our young people to have a chance to enter the mainstream of society and pursue the American dream, they can only do that through education.”² Worrying that dropout rates among college graduates were “morally unacceptable” and “economically unsustainable,” Duncan reiterated President Barack Obama’s promise that by 2020 the United States would lead the world in college graduates. He zeroed in on those “reformed” public school districts where “the focus isn’t on the adults but the focus is on student achievement.” These districts have forged new collective bargaining agreements with previously recalcitrant teachers’ unions that added rigor to the teacher tenure process, introduced measures for firing ineffective teachers, expanded merit pay for teacher performance, and increased the number of charter schools operating free from union restrictions.

Critics of the education reform movement often claim that the reformers do not take into account the “out of school factors” that affect children’s classroom achievement. Diane Ravitch, education historian and former Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush, has been at the forefront of the criticism since her somewhat surprising political shift to the left in the early 2000s. In August 2012 she wrote on her influential education policy blog:

Wouldn’t it be refreshing to hear someone say that “eliminating poverty in America is the civil rights issue of our day?” Since poverty is the single most reliable predictor of poor performance in school, poor health, poor attendance,

² Arne Duncan, “Prayer Breakfast in Honor of Martin Luther King” (speech, Washington D.C., January 17, 2011), U.S. Department of Education, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?297548-1/prayer-breakfast-honor-martin-luther-king>.

dropping out, and almost every negative indicator, wouldn't it be wonderful to hear some of the politicians addressing the root cause of inequality?³

The contour of the “education reform debate” is often reduced to contrasting assertions as to the cause of poor student performance in low-income school districts: it is either poverty, or it is indifferent, unmotivated teachers. Even when the reformers acknowledge that poverty matters, they insist that such a position should not prevent America from engaging in much needed internal school reform. In this sense, the reformers’ well-publicized mantra of “No Excuses” implies that poverty should excuse neither poor student achievement nor the inadequacies of our school system.⁴ “I do believe that schools and teachers can make a tremendous difference in the lives of kids who face these challenges every day,” Michelle Rhee wrote in her 2012 book, *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First*. “Do our children face significant obstacles that impact their ability to learn? Absolutely. Can we, as educators, still make an enormous difference in their lives, if we’re doing our jobs well? Absolutely. Those are not two mutually exclusive notions.”⁵ Michelle Rhee’s book, notably, does not offer any policy proposals for eradicating poverty.

But such criticism of the existing education reform movement and of the bipartisan elite political-consensus surrounding it fails to provide us with a historical and political understanding as to why the education reform debate has been defined in such a narrow fashion, and why education has become the primary means to discuss

³ Diane Ravitch, “Is Education the Civil Rights Issue of Our Day?” August 30, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/08/30/is-education-the-civil-rights-issue-of-our-day/>.

⁴ Kathryn Strom, “The Bottom Line on ‘No-Excuses’ and Poverty in School Reform,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/the-bottom-line-on-no-excuses-and-poverty-in-school-reform/2012/09/29/813683bc-08c1-11e2-afff-d6c7f20a83bf_blog.html.

⁵ Michelle Rhee, *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 209.

poverty and inequality. Ravitch might best be viewed as the Paul Krugman of education. Krugman, a Nobel Prize winning economist, has little influence on economic policy despite his neo-Keynesian solutions to the economic crisis being aired in *The New York Times* op-ed page every Monday and Friday. Ravitch, the most prominent critic of the education reforms she herself once developed, is today the darling of more left-wing education activists frustrated at their inability to influence education reform policy. Her and others' calls for anti-poverty programs and schools with "wrap-around" social services have fallen largely on deaf ears. But from an internal position in the debate Diane Ravitch rarely has the time to reflect on how and why this breed of education reform has become so hegemonic within political and policy circles.

The political will to advance policies that tackle poverty and inequality has been weakened since the Reagan administration declared that the War on Poverty had failed, due to its allegedly perverse anti-work incentives. The notions of fairness and equality that underpinned New Deal liberalism, which dominated American political discourse from 1936 to 1973, gave way amidst the stagflation and deindustrialization of the late 1970s to a conservative revival that waged war on the welfare state and on "big government." This conservative or "neoliberal" shift in American politics decreased the government's role in redistribution, job creation, and urban policy.⁶

It is this downsizing of expectations that allows us to understand why a bipartisan political elite today focuses on education as the primary means by which to redress inequality of opportunity and of life outcomes. In response to the Reagan

⁶ Loic Wacquant, "Three Steps to a Historical Anthropology of Actually Existing Neoliberalism," *Social Anthropology*, 20:1 (February 2012), 66-79.

era's claim that only a less active government could restore economic growth, much of the national Democratic party leadership moved to the center, embracing President Bill Clinton's 1996 State of the Union address message that the "era of big government is over" and that a major national priority should be restoring fiscal discipline in both Washington, D.C. and the states.⁷ By the 1990s the age of "lowered expectations" and fiscal discipline had come to govern mainstream policy discourse. Social spending increasingly became constrained by the discipline of "accountable" and "measurable outcomes"; in regard to anti-poverty programs, preparing the poor to re-enter the formal labor market became the primary goal. Education reform, which called not for drastic increases in spending but rather changes in "accountability" measures, increasingly become the (rhetorical) answer to growing inequality, to rising unemployment, and to the proliferation of low-wage jobs. This thesis sets out to elucidate education reform's role in the neoliberal and Third Way shift, and investigate the function that education can and cannot play in overcoming the issues of poverty, inequality, and unemployment that we face today.

II. Methodology

In this thesis I use an interdisciplinary "mixed methods" approach of historical, empirical, and normative analysis to discern the "moral economy" or worldview of the education reform movement. In terms of data, I make use of historical work and empirical social science as well as more normative and theoretical analysis on the role of education in a democratic society. For example, in my chapter on the ideological impetus behind the education reform movement I use secondary

⁷ Bill Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union" (speech, Washington D.C., January 23, 1996), The American Presidency Project, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53091>.

and primary texts to trace the education reform debate from 1983 (when the *A Nation at Risk* report was published) until the present day. In contrast, the chapters covering debates about poverty and inequality delve into the sociological and economic literature on schools' potential effects on disadvantaged children, as well as the current political economic debate as to the sources of growing inequality. The fourth and final substantive chapter draws on my earlier chapters' work on the education reformers' alleged commitment to restoring equality of opportunity and to alleviating inequality, while also using a close reading of normative theorists of distributive justice and of democratic education, in order to develop my own moral and political account of the social policies necessary to achieve a more humane policy discourse and a more just United States.

Through an "external" critique of the education reform movement, this thesis aims to problematize their causal claims as well as their normative vision. This thesis does not aim to offer new empirical work on the achievement gap, on the success or failure of education reform policies, or on the association between educational attainment and inequality. While I draw widely on the empirical social science research that addresses these questions, this thesis seeks to understand the prominence of the current education reform movement and interrogate their claims as to what they believe education reform can and should do for American society. I contextualize and evaluate critically the policy proposals of the education reform movement, and thus problematize the education reformers' importance and continued ability to influence policy debates.

We constantly debate education reform; politicians devote their campaigns to it and philanthropists throw billions of dollars into this social “experiment.” Why does the current American political system fail to devote similar attention to analyzing the causes of poverty and growing inequality – and possible policy solutions to redress these critical issues? This thesis places the discourse of education reform into a broader conversation about the threat that radical social inequality and poverty pose to both substantive equality of opportunity and the future of a democratic society. Some might view this as unfair: what right do I have to “force” education reformers to speak to the causes of unemployment, for example, when they are only interested in improving our schools? My contention is that when Americans think of the perceived importance of education reform they think of it precisely in terms of the real crises of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and underemployment. The reformers claim that education reform is sufficient to realize equality of opportunity and reduce poverty, but this claim has not yet been adequately examined.

III. Structure of the Argument

This thesis explains the mass media and bipartisan political celebration of the education reform movement as the “new civil rights movement” and the education reform movement’s vision of the role that education should play in creating equality of opportunity and career opportunities. The education reformers describe the U.S. educational system as being in a state of crisis, speaking of our failing public schools, particularly those in our urban centers, and blaming ineffective teachers and intransigent teachers’ unions for the crisis.⁸ They justify their reforms on the basis of

⁸ This despite the reality that many of the lowest performing school districts are in states where unionized teachers do not or barely exist. See Valerie Strauss, “The Real Effect of Teachers Union

two broader problems: that America is abandoning a commitment to equality of opportunity, and that our undemanding and inefficient educational system does not sufficiently train students to be globally competitive or productive. Reformers, business elites, and politicians refer to both of these concerns when advancing the reform agenda of charterization, raising curriculum standards, and motivating teachers by merit pay and the threat of layoffs for ineffective educators. While charter school proponents and other education policy reformers tend to appeal to equality of opportunity to justify their proposals, business elites and policy makers often refer to competitiveness or workers' skills as justifying a radical transformation of our education system, claiming that workers' inadequate education or skills is the cause of their low-wage, unemployed, or underemployed status. Education reform, we frequently hear, will restore equality of opportunity and will produce the high-skilled workers "fit" for the 21st century "knowledge economy." In a time when bipartisan austerity politics says we must constrain spending on entitlement programs, let alone expand the provision of public goods, education reform takes on a peculiar power in our public policy discourse surrounding everything from poverty, inequality, and unemployment. By elucidating the reform movement's implicit vision of the role that education plays in a democratic capitalist society, I will render transparent the constricted vision of equality that the broader education reform movement advances.

Chapter One will clarify the two-part belief common to education reformers and the bipartisan consensus surrounding the movement: 1) that education can overcome the constraints of poverty and enhance social mobility; 2) that education

can enhance economic prosperity and reduce inequality of life outcomes by training students for the jobs of the future. I will begin by tracing the political origins of President George W. Bush's administration's No Child Left Behind Act and the Obama administration's Race to the Top education reform agenda. I will then sketch the corporate foundation-funded education reform movement, and its role in shaping the discourse of the education reform movement. Thus this chapter notes how the particular reforms proposed by the reformers—including the creation of charter schools, the implementation of teacher “accountability” through standardized testing and a common core curriculum, and the breaking of tenure for ineffective teachers—conform to the broader neoliberal policy consensus that public provision is made most efficient when it is subject to market discipline. More important, I make clear how the current education reform movement gained importance just as the revival of American conservatism and the subsequent Third Way shift in the Democratic Party weakened public support for “costly” social policy initiatives. Education reform became a “magic bullet” to solve inequalities of opportunity and of life outcomes without the polity having to engage in any divisive conflicts over the distribution of wealth and power.

The second chapter examines how the social, economic, and cultural effects of poverty hamper low-income children's school performance and thus prevent the realization of equality of opportunity. I contend that the education reform proposals are the legacy of the belief that poverty results from improper cultural or social behavior on the part of poor people: poor youth lack “grit,” the education reform

movement tells us.⁹ In reality, poverty is primarily a material and structural reality with “cultural” consequences (in this sense some poor children may lack “grit,” but that trait is disproportionately nurtured under middle- and upper middle-class economic and social circumstances). This chapter examines the academic literature on the limits of schooling alone to overcome the disadvantages of material poverty and the social and educational “capital” that impoverished children acquire from their parents and from the broader disadvantaged communities in which they live. In particular, the chapter focuses on the education reform movement’s persistent unwillingness to acknowledge that any serious education reform will have to tackle concentrated poverty, which would be done by one of two ways (or by combining the two): 1) advancing politically controversial proposals for socio-economic integration of schools and/or housing across metropolitan lines; or 2) taking on the ideology of “fiscal restraint” by arguing for generous funding of “wraparound services” for all disadvantaged schools. In short, if the American polity cannot address the structural inequalities that plague our society, including those of concentrated poverty and segregation, we will not be able to restore substantive equality of opportunity for all children.

⁹ See: Katie Osgood, “‘Grit’ Becoming New Reform Mantra—Unfortunately,” *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/grit-becoming-new-reform-mantra--unfortunately/2012/10/02/bff269a6-0bd5-11e2-bb5e-492c0d30bff6_blog.html. I am actually less suspicious of Paul Tough than is Osgood. Tough’s quote is worrisome: “Yes, those kinds of neighborhoods could use all kinds of structural change... But I also really believe that education, maybe not the education we have right now, but education can reverse things very quickly. That if a kid grows up in that neighborhood and gets the right kind of support, the right kind of intervention, they can end poverty for themselves, um, right away, and it doesn’t have to take a huge change for the whole neighborhood.” However, given Tough’s work, I believe he means that we need “education” that entails funding of wraparound services and anti-poverty programs (the first part of his book details the deleterious effects of concentrated poverty, or has he calls it “toxic stress”). The problem is that some may take (and have taken) “grit” into the policy discourse and leave aside the emphasis on poverty.

Chapter Three examines the scholarly and political debate as to whether or not a shortage of “skills” or “educational attainment” is a primary cause of economic inequality as well as unemployment and underemployment. This chapter points to increased consensus among liberal and left economists that the exceptional American inequality and poverty experienced in the last 40 years largely results from political policies that redistributed income and wealth upwards and promoted the weakening of the minimum wage and of union power. The evidence suggests that these causes of growing inequality and declining social mobility cannot be addressed (or even seriously dented) by increasing the number of individuals reaching and graduating from college. Greater equality of outcomes will have to be brought about by increasing the minimum wage, restoring the right to collective bargaining, and investing in high-wage job creation. In addition, the evidence shows that high rates of unemployment or underemployment are not primarily due to Americans having the wrong skills; rather, the American economy is suffering from slow growth that can only be solved by broader macroeconomic fiscal policy.

There is a legitimate worry in this academic literature that given the major gains of globalization and “robotization,” we are unlikely to return to the manufacturing glory of the past.¹⁰ That is, even if we raise the minimum wage, restore the right to collectively bargain, and encourage wage growth across all sectors, our predominantly service and “knowledge-based,” post-industrial economy is likely to generate greater inequality in labor market outcomes than did the post-

¹⁰ Robert Reich, “Manufacturing Jobs Are Never Coming Back,” *Forbes*, May 28, 2009, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/05/28/robert-reich-manufacturing-business-economy.html>.

World War II industrial economy of 1947-1973.¹¹ Acknowledging this does not mean that we have to accept inequality. Instead, American society would have to engage in redistributive policies and expansion of universal social provision. What is clear is that equality cannot be created by giving everyone middle-class educations and skills if there are not sufficient number of well-paying jobs to go around. Too few members of our political class address the less desirable side of the “meritocratic” world they deem as just: even if we could create the meritocratic system that educational reformers claim to desire, does this mean that those who do not excel within this system should be relegated to the ranks of today’s (or the future’s) low-wage American families?

Thus Chapter Four offers a critique of the uniquely American obsession with education as the primary mechanism for providing equality of opportunity and a decent quality of life for all. I will argue that Americans embrace a limited, formal vision of equality of opportunity and that conservatives have used the language of equality of opportunity to prevent the redistribution and social expenditure necessary to create “fair equality of opportunity,” a term that John Rawls develops in his *A Theory of Justice*. For Rawls, “fair equality of opportunity” demands adequate levels of base-line equality such that “positions are to be not only open in a formal sense but

¹¹ Some economists contend that we could create more high wage jobs by engaging in public investment in infrastructure, mass transit, and alternative energy, as well as managing currency manipulation. In addition, as I mentioned above, they advocate increasing the minimum wage and restoring the right to organize to American workers could serve to lessen inequality. For an example of a broad and comprehensive plan to raise the wages of American workers, see: Jennifer Erickson and Michael Ettlinger editors, *300 Million Engines of Growth: A Middle-Out Plan for Jobs, Business, and a Growing Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, June 2013), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://images2.americanprogress.org/CAP/2013/07/ProgressiveGrowth.pdf>. See also: Melissa Boteach, Erik Stegman, Sarah Baron, Tracey Ross, and Katie Wright, *The War on Poverty: Then and Now Applying Lessons Learned to the Challenges and Opportunities Facing a 21st-Century America* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, January 2014), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/PovertyAnniversary.pdf>.

that all should have a fair chance to attain them.”¹² If we value such a position, we must acknowledge the redistribution of resources that will be necessary to create fair equality of opportunity. Most important we need to recognize that fair equality of opportunity is threatened not only by inequalities within the school system, but also by inequalities outside of it, such as wealth, health, and neighborhood status.

I worry that the language of equality of opportunity has been coopted by conservatives to defend “meritocracy” and *inequality* of outcomes. Thus, I argue that if American society is to redress growing inequality, the concept of democratic equality must be introduced into American political discourse as an alternative value to strictly “meritocratic” visions of equality of opportunity. Democratic equality attempts to temper the competitive nature of social interaction, and argues that all members of the community, regardless of their position (or their parents’ position) in the labor market should be guaranteed those basic goods necessary to develop one’s human potential. Of course, in the absence of an adequate baseline in terms of such basic human needs as education, healthcare, childcare, and basic income security, substantive equality of life opportunities cannot exist. I will distinguish between fair equality of opportunity and democratic equality, and ultimately I hope that we can push our political discourse to a place where we debate the merit of these two concepts, rather than the more formal equality of opportunity we currently embrace. Of course, political theory cannot give rise to the social conditions necessary to achieve its normative vision. Only social movements – such as a revived version of the labor movement of the 1930s or the civil rights movement of the 1960s – will

¹² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), 73.

achieve the redistribution of wealth and political power necessary make this vision reality.

In this thesis I seek to illustrate how the education reform movement is symptomatic of a broader neoliberal ideological tendency to hold individuals “accountable” for their success and failure in our market society—despite the fact that more than ever individuals’ life opportunities are constrained by the social situation to which they are born. Ultimately I examine how our current societal obsession with education reform distracts us from exploring those political and policy changes necessary to establish equal citizenship – the true goal of the original civil rights movement – in the United States.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Emergence and Importance of The Education Reformers

I. Where to Begin? A Political Economic Contextualization of Education Reform

In this chapter I set out the education reformers' implicit theoretical outlook, both empirical and normative, on which their movement is based. The education reform movement is one of the most important contemporary U.S. public policy initiatives. It not only drives much of American K-12 educational policy discussion but also displaces more concerted public policy analysis of the causes of – and solutions to – poverty and inequality. In order to understand this public policy quandary, one must understand the motivations and interests of the key actors as well as the political and economic context in which this policy movement arose. The key public spokespersons for the reform movement often write for polemical purposes and do not always make clear the empirical claims and normative orientations that motivate their programmatic agendas. But a careful study of the network of foundations, policy advocates, charter school operators, and educational administrators that constitutes the educational reform movement, as well as the politicians that support their cause, can elucidate their common convictions.

There are two foundational beliefs that will be explained in this chapter and then explored throughout the thesis: First, reformers believe that poverty should not be used as an explanation for inadequate student performance, and that a significant improvement in teacher quality and accountability – in part measured by standardized test results – can provide equality of opportunity to all students, regardless of their social background. Second, politicians, economic elites, and the reformers propose

education as a remedy to technological changes and shifts in labor market demand that have purportedly caused rising income inequality, unemployment, and underemployment.

To understand the emergence of these claims, we must contextualize education in the bipartisan elite political consensus that “money cannot solve social problems” and that bureaucratic, “big government” initiatives have failed to redress urban decay, concentrated poverty, and increased inequality. The neoliberal consensus that anti-poverty programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) created perverse disincentives to work in the formal labor market helped shift how Americans viewed the overall “welfare state” from the Reagan era onwards. This negative image of government anti-poverty efforts emerged despite the considerable scholarly evidence that Great Society programs to this day keep tens of millions of Americans out of poverty.¹³ The success of the “Reagan revolution,” which consisted of upwardly redistributive “tax reform” and serious cuts in means-tested anti-poverty programs led to the move of most national Democratic party leaders to the ideological center. These “Third Way” or “neoliberal” Democrats were led by President Bill Clinton (a key founder of the moderate Democratic Leadership Council) who announced in his 1996 inaugural address that “the era of big

¹³ Melissa Boteach, Erik Stegman, Sarah Baron, Tracey Ross, and Katie Wright, *The War on Poverty: Then and Now Applying Lessons Learned to the Challenges and Opportunities Facing a 21st-Century America* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, January 2014), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/PovertyAnniversary.pdf>. See also: Alan Pyke, “Social Safety Net Programs Kept Tens Of Millions Out Of Poverty,” *Think Progress*, September 17, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2013/09/17/2633881/poverty-data-shows-importance-safety-net-programs-millions/>. For the argument that the Great Society programs did not go far enough, and that the failure of the Great Society to implement universal childcare and healthcare rendered means tested programs such as AFDC vulnerable to hostility from working class families that did not qualify for them, see: Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42.

government” was over and that large scale public programs to redress socio-economic inequality had too often proved unsustainable or even counter-productive.

In this context, education reform remained as one of the few areas in which politicians of both parties could claim to redress inequality and poverty, without engaging in attempts to increase public expenditure amidst the alleged necessity of fiscal responsibility. Only in the context of the rise of a neoliberal bipartisan consensus in favor of “smaller, more efficient government,” deregulation, and lower rates of taxation can we see why education reform became such a hot-button issue in contemporary American life. One could “reform” schools through increased efficiency without having to increase social expenditure significantly. Only through a critique of this consensus can we come to recognize our problematic obsession with education reform as the primary means for solving America’s social ills.

II. Education’s Importance in the Third Way Neoliberal Shift

i. Market Principles of Education Reform

In the political realm the education reform movement is a “Third Way” Democratic Party project that has garnered serious political interest from moderate Republicans. More conservative Republicans are at times wary of the movement because of its favoring of national, rather than local, standards, and because of the support it receives from socially liberal foundations. This elite-driven movement for education reform, write education sociologists Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine, “is the most vivid institutional expression to date of the changing of the political guard from liberal New Dealers to centrist/right New Democrats and far right

Republicans.”¹⁴ Diane Ravitch makes a similar point about the new “Third Way” shift in education policy:

The new thinking—now ensconced in both parties—saw the public school system as obsolete, because it is controlled by the government and burdened by bureaucracy. Government-run schools, said a new generation of reformers, are ineffective because they are a monopoly; as such, they have no incentive to do better, and they serve the interests of adults who work in the system, not children. Democrats saw a chance to reinvent government; Republicans, a chance to diminish the power of the teachers’ unions, which, in their view, protect jobs and pensions while blocking effective management and innovation.¹⁵

Advocates of the dominant reform regime frequently term their solutions “accountability-based reform.” The proposed reforms consist of various initiatives that aim to increase student performance – especially the performance of low-income students. But this movement for “accountability” distinguishes itself from the earlier “equity” movement in education reform of the civil rights era by insisting that the new accountability proposals will raise all student achievement (not only that of disadvantaged and/or disabled children), which is purportedly lagging behind other nations.¹⁶ The educational reform policy arsenal includes: emphasizing standardized tests scores to measure student progress and teacher quality; holding schools and teachers accountable through school closures that penalize underperforming schools; merit pay that rewards teachers who bring up student test scores; controlling classroom instruction and increasing the rigor of school curricula by pushing states to adopt the national standards of a “Common Core”; and using market-like models

¹⁴ Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine, *Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education: What's at Stake?* (New York: Teachers College, 2012), 3.

¹⁵ Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 9.

¹⁶ Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 63. See also: Christine E. Sleeter, “Democracy, Equity, and Accountability,” in *Democracy and Equity at Risk* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

through the spread of charter schools and educational voucher programs. These “marketizations,” reformers claim, will improve student achievement and provide public schools with incentives to improve their own students’ outcomes. The reformers rely on widespread public acceptance of the narrative of failing urban and low-income schools to garner public backing for choice, charters, merit pay, and high-stakes standardized testing as the means by which to rescue our children’s future.

Charter schools, free from much of the bureaucratic regulations of public school districts, allow the reformers to implement many of their proposals. Interestingly, charter schools did not initially emerge as a tool to “marketize” public provision of education, but rather as an effort by educators to increase teacher and school autonomy. Long-time American Federation of Teachers’ President Albert Shanker and educational administration professor Ray Budde first advocated for charter schools in the late 1980s as a means to de-bureaucratize schools and provide teachers greater autonomy.¹⁷ Ironically, the charter school movement would eventually be identified with hostility to teachers unions, as charter school advocates (and private charter school companies) wanted the ability to hire and fire teachers at will, set teacher’s salary schedule, reward teachers with merit-based pay, and require long working hours. School reformers shifted away from the earlier advocacy of vouchers and towards charters in the 1990s in order to make “choice” a coherent part of the education reform strategy. The movement still included advocates of vouchers,

¹⁷ Eric E. Rofes and Lisa M. Stulberg, *The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Toward a Progressive Politics of School Choice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 24-25.

but increasingly argued for private management of public schools and a growth in charter schools.¹⁸

The education reform movement as a whole centers increasingly around the corporate charter school industry, whose governance of publicly funded schools radically accelerated during the early years of the 21st century. By 2010, only 30,000 students participated in publicly funded voucher programs, but over 1.4 million students were enrolled in around 4,600 charter schools.¹⁹ Thus the charter movement came to dominate the “education reform movement.”²⁰ As Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine argue, the changing role of charters came as foundations increasingly used them to get around teacher tenure or other bureaucratic red-tape:

This formulation of a small number of charters functioning as experimental, relatively autonomous programs was swept up in the 1990s by a movement organized to promote an ambitious alternative to public schools. More to the point, charter movement ideology veered to the Right. It increasingly emphasized charter schooling as an alternative to status quo public education, identified teachers and their unions as primary culprits in the “decline” of academic achievement, and characterized the problem of public education as primarily a consequence of dysfunctional organizations while rendering invisible the inequitable distribution of resources to the poorest public school systems.²¹

But before I describe in detail the corporate charter industry and the education reformers, we must look more closely at the context in which they emerged. The growing importance of charters, merit pay, and “accountability”-based education can only be understood by looking at the broader political-economic history in which these proposals became central issues.

¹⁸ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 121.

¹⁹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 132.

²⁰ Fabricant and Fine, 20.

²¹ Fabricant and Fine, 19.

ii. *A Nation at Risk*

The political history of the modern “accountability” education reform movement begins with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report from President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report argued that America’s “failing schools” were a threat to economic and national security.²² This obsessive concern with declining American competitiveness arose after the stagflation of the 1970s, the accelerated deindustrialization of the 1981-82 recession, and defeats to American military and diplomatic power in Vietnam and the Iran hostage crisis. Thus, *A Nation at Risk* poses the alleged decline of U.S. educational performance in the context of a national economic and social crisis:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. This report, the result of 18 months of study, seeks to generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation's commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land.²³

A Nation At Risk encouraged states and the nation to draft more ambitious curriculum standards in many subjects, including increased requirements in science and foreign language.²⁴ The educational system should promote “excellence” and set “high

²² The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), accessed March 23, 2014, http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/SOTW_A_Nation_at_Risk_1983.pdf.

²³ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*.

²⁴ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 22.

expectations and goals for all learners, then try in every way possible to help students reach them.”²⁵

According to Diane Ravitch, *A Nation at Risk* advances elements of the paranoid “state of crisis” that defines the modern corporate education reform movement. (In her view the movement is paranoid because American schools in districts populated by middle class and more affluent families educate children quite successfully, even by international standards).²⁶ But Ravitch views *A Nation at Risk* as focused primarily on curriculum reform and far less on testing and teacher accountability than the later reform waves:

Whereas the authors of *A Nation at Risk* concerned themselves with the quality and breadth of the curriculum that every youngster should study, No Child Left Behind concerned itself only with basic skills. *A Nation at Risk* was animated by a vision of good education as the foundation of a better life for individuals and for our democratic society, but No Child Left Behind had no vision other than improving test scores in reading and math.²⁷

According to Ravitch, when the movement for curriculum standards faltered in the 1990s, education leaders retreated into the “relative safety of standardized testing of basic skills, which was a poor substitute for a full-fledged program of curriculum and assessments.”²⁸ Ravitch reads *A Nation at Risk* not “as a revolutionary document,” but as “an impassioned plea to make our schools function better in their core mission as academic institutions and to make our education system live up to our nation’s ideals. It warned that the nation would be harmed economically and socially unless education was dramatically improved for *all* children.”²⁹ The report identified

²⁵ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*.

²⁶ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 64-65.

²⁷ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 29.

²⁸ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 22.

²⁹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 25.

curricular content, not teachers or lack of school choice, as the culprit in America's declining academic performance.

Ravitch argues that George W. Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind Act's focus upon accountability and test scores contradicted the vision of *A Nation of Risk*, which she claims envisioned legislating national standards alongside greater support for our lowest income schools. But Ravitch fails to see how the reception of *A Nation at Risk* was shaped by the broader ideological vision of the "Reagan Revolution." *A Nation At Risk*'s call for education reform readily merged with the increasingly dominant conservative view that the war on poverty had to be transformed into a war on the culture of poverty, a war that could be waged through a retrenchment of means-tested programs and a revitalization of urban education. In his autobiography, *The Thirteenth Man: A Reagan Cabinet Memoir*, Reagan-appointed Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, notes how *A Nation at Risk* and the fervor it caused could fit into their broader conservative project: "Overall, I felt that [Reagan] could support its findings and recommendations while rejecting massive federal spending."³⁰ In this sense, *A Nation at Risk*'s analysis shares in the later school reform proposals in viewing education as the major tool, perhaps the only tool, for redressing poverty and the poor performance of low-income students. What is missing in Ravitch's analysis in both *The Death of The American School System* and *Reign of Error* is a macro-analysis of how the "accountability" reform movement evolved within the Reagan

³⁰ As cited in Megan Erickson, "A Nation of Little Lebowski Urban Achievers," *Jacobin Magazine*, accessed April 6, 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/12/a-nation-of-little-lebowski-urban-achievers/>.

Revolution and the subsequent Third Way or neoliberal shift in Democratic Party and broader American politics.³¹

Not only did *A Nation at Risk*'s sentiments merge with education reform concerns over equality of opportunity, but also it articulated the increasingly prevalent concern that American workers were not prepared for the "skill-economy." *A Nation at Risk* signaled the existence of a crisis in the economy, in national security, and in schools as the first responders who could impart the more advanced math, science, and analytic reasoning skills that would make high school graduates economically competitive in an increasingly knowledge-based, post-industrial economy. The report argued that the American glory days of manufacturing were gone; we faced "a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever-greater danger, and of ever-larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them."³² The document stirred up fears of America's declining position in the globalized economy, and portrayed education as a main avenue for economic revitalization.

iii. Welfare Reform and Education Reform

The transition from *A Nation at Risk* to No Child Left Behind required shifts in the policy orientation of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Patrick J. McGuinn in *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* describes the emergence of President Clinton's Goals 2000, and eventually George W. Bush's 2001 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, "No Child Left Behind," as a result of the "Third Way"

³¹ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*; Ravitch, *The Death and Life*.

³² The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*.

shift in Democratic Party politics. In addition to calling for a more nimble, efficient government, the Third Way shift argued that the rise of the post-industrial economy required a more flexible, educated workforce, which could be best created by encouraging individuals to complete high school and to invest in higher education. Thus a “happy medium” was struck between conservatives who saw public bureaucracies as problematic, but were unwilling to expand the federal role in education, and Democrats who were willing to flirt with “school choice” and investment in publicly-funded charter schools, but thought that Republican voucher plans that enabled vouchers to be used for private schooling would bankrupt or endanger public schools.

During the George H.W. Bush administration the call for federal leadership in education reform only became more high profile. While George H.W. Bush did not enact a reform program with regard to education, he did manage to increase media attention on the perceived crisis in U.S. schools.³³ Republicans remained too committed to local control to produce anything like President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation for years to come. But in the years following *A Nation At Risk*, writes Bush communications adviser Lesley Arsht, “the Bush administration was successful at one thing in education... they staked the ground around standards and national goals and began a conversation that raised the profile of education. They put education on the agenda and established improving education as a high priority for the nation.”³⁴

³³ Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2006), 73.

³⁴ As cited in McGuinn, 73.

In the 1990s education reform flourished as a centrist project that would purportedly restore equality of opportunity and economic growth. This is implicitly a common theme of McGuinn's analysis, which makes extensive use of both politicians' and advisers' justifications for putting campaign emphasis on education.³⁵ New Democrats used education to deflect criticism that they were wasteful spenders on the undeserving poor. Republicans used education to claim they cared about the deserving poor. Perhaps the most telling claim in the book describes Clinton's focus on education as a way to avoid the shortfalls of New Deal liberalism:

During the [1992] campaign and throughout the rest of the decade Clinton and the Democrats sought to capitalize on the widespread perception that Bush and the Republican Party were unconcerned about the plight of the poor and middle-class Americans to promote a new vision of governmental activism. The focus on schools enabled Clinton to call for federal leadership and spending in a policy era where it had broad public support and was unlikely to engender welfare type criticism. Clinton used education reform as a symbol of his efforts to move the Democratic Party to the center ideologically.³⁶

Presidential candidate after presidential candidate's focus on education and silence on broader social and economic policy reflected the emerging political consensus regarding post-New Deal liberalism America: the welfare state was messy, created perverted economic incentives, caused poverty traps, and slowed down capitalist growth. Education suffered no such criticism because it purportedly creates opportunity for all without punishing an elite few.

Perhaps most important, the new education reform was "Third Way" because it did not have to be tied to "big government" spending and waste. Education was to be "accountable" and "disciplined," much like other parts of government, such as welfare:

³⁵ See McGuinn, 76, 79, 147, and 157.

³⁶ McGuinn, 76.

Clinton's emphasis on the need for increased education reform, as opposed to merely increased spending, was also very important. His speeches and legislative proposals marked a clear break with the approach of Democrats in the past—and with the old liberal policy regime—which had freed the education debate in terms of promoting integration and equity through federal mandates and spending.³⁷

Just as the New Democrat shift represented an increased bipartisan consensus around cutting “wasteful” government spending and perverse social programs like welfare, education reform represented a chance to provide opportunity and economic prosperity without necessarily committing to increased spending. It is true that Democrats tended to fight for more spending on education, even when that spending was conditional on school progress.³⁸ But by the 1990s “education reform” was emerging as a peculiar issue where politicians could rhetorically support the American Dream without talking about redistribution or significantly increased social spending; instead they discussed accountability, testing, and teacher quality.

iv. No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the New Neoliberal Equality

The push for federal education reform came to fruition in the 2000 election of George W. Bush and the passage of No Child Left Behind. Both Gore and Bush had run as “education candidates,” using much of the “Clintonian” “Third Way” rhetoric. As Chester Finn, Bruno Manno, and Diane Ravitch observed after the 2000 presidential election:

For the first time in memory, both major parties and both sets of candidates agree that the federal government has important contributions to make in reforming America's schools... [There is] widening agreement that

³⁷ McGuinn, 98.

³⁸ McGuinn, 104 and 167.

Washington's present approach to K-12 education policy—an approach that has scarcely changed since LBJ's time—is broken and needs fixing.³⁹

The current political world we live in, defined by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top Legislation, and the continued power of “education reformers” to set the political agenda, is a product of this “Third Way” shift in the Democratic party and an increasing centrality of market-based, “accountability” driven education reform.

No Child Left Behind focused on high-stakes testing and accountability and rejected traditional Republican beliefs in local school autonomy. No Child Left Behind dictates that states' achieve 100% “proficiency” by 2014. The Act requires states to develop assessments in basic skills. States had to administer these assessments to all students at select grade levels in order to receive federal school funding. The Act did not assert a national achievement standard, and standards were set by each individual state. But No Child Left Behind expanded the federal role in public education through annual testing, annual academic progress reports, teacher qualifications, and funding changes. As education policy expert Linda Darling-Hammond writes, “The broad goal of No Child Left Behind is to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially underperforming groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions... The bill intends to [do this] by focusing schools' attention on improving test scores for all groups of students... providing parents with more educational choices, and ensuring better-qualified teachers.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Chester Finn, Bruno Manno and Diane Ravitch, “Education 2001: Getting the Job Done—A Memorandum to the President-Elect and the 107th Congress” (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2000), 1-2.

⁴⁰ Linda Darling-Hammond, “From ‘Separate but Equal’ to ‘No Child Left Behind’: The Collision of New Standards and Old Inequalities,” in *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind*

Schools that miss “Annual Yearly Progress” (AYP) marks for a second consecutive year are publicly labeled as being “in need of improvement” and are required to develop a two-year improvement plan for the subject that the school is not teaching well.⁴¹ Continually missing AYP would mean forcing the school to offer free tutoring and other supplemental education services to struggling students, and eventually being labeled as requiring “corrective action.” This might involve wholesale replacement of staff, introduction of a new curriculum, or extending the amount of time students spend in class.⁴² Five years of failure in AYP would require the draft of a plan to restructure the entire school, a plan that would be implemented if the school fails to hit its AYP targets for the sixth year in a row. Common options include closing the school, turning the school into a charter school, hiring a private company to run the school, or asking the state office of education to run the school directly.⁴³

President Obama’s “Race to the Top,” passed as part of the 2009 stimulus bill, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aimed to improve upon its predecessor, No Child Left Behind, focusing on four areas that each state is expected to include in its application for grant money: improving the quality of teachers, creating standards to improve teaching and learning, using longitudinal data systems to improve student and teacher performance, and making sure all students have qualified teachers and improving achievement in low-performing schools. It devoted \$5 billion dollars to a competition among the nation’s states, in which states had to

Act is Damaging Our Children and Our Schools, ed. Deborah Meier and George Wood (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 3.

⁴¹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 97.

⁴² Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 97.

⁴³ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 98.

agree to adopt the new Common Core standards, expand charter schools, evaluate teacher effectiveness in part in terms of test scores, and agree to “turn around” their lowest-performing schools by firing teachers or closing schools.⁴⁴ While *Race to the Top* eliminated *No Child Left Behind*’s mandate that all students must be “proficient,” as judged by state’s test scores, it shifted to a “value-added” requirement that teachers must increase students’ test scores every year. Many critics continue to worry that these measurements cannot correctly identify teachers’ impact distinct from other factors, and that schools that cater to low-income students will continue to be punished for their inability to overcome “out of school factors.”⁴⁵

No Child Left Behind and *Race to the Top* dramatically altered the role of the federal government in education policy. The changes in policy were accompanied by an equally profound alteration in the political purposes and “culture” of education legislation. The increasing push for federal input in education, through standards and “accountability,” efforts to ensure higher-quality teachers, and charterization incentives, occurred amidst a broader political and ideological context that blamed concentrated poverty and inequality on a “culture of poverty” and thus rejected the forms of social provision that could eliminate poverty and inequality. As the Economic Policy Institute noted in 2002:

As a nation, we continue to support the role – even the obligation – of schooling to close these gaps, but at the same time we create or magnify the same gaps with other social policies. Except for continuing support for Head Start (actually a relatively inexpensive program), our public policies do little to address the negative educational effects that income disparities have on young children. The U.S. should not use one hand to blame the schools for

⁴⁴ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 14.

⁴⁵ Elaine Weiss, “Mismatches in *Race to the Top* Limit Educational Improvement: Lack of Time, Resources, and Tools to Address Opportunity Gaps Puts Lofty State Goals Out of Reach,” (Washington, D.C.: Bolder, Broader Approach to Education, 2013), 5.

inadequately serving disadvantaged children when its social policies have helped create these disadvantages – especially income disadvantages – with the other hand.⁴⁶

It is true that Democrats fought for increases in Title 1 spending for low-income school districts and for extra help for particularly disadvantaged schools, and thus were politically distinct from their Republican peers. But our political debate had shifted to a place where education was the only arena in which Democrats could (largely unsuccessfully) push for increased funding. As educational historians Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe noted in 2007:

The long-standing difference over funding and the federal role in education no longer seems to be the only, or even the main, political fault line. Rather, by ruling out discussion about the connections between race, education, and the political economy, *No Child Left Behind* has shifted the debate over education and racial equality sharply to the Right, marginalizing the Left and scrambling traditional political alliances.⁴⁷

What Kantor and Lowe point out is that the primary difference between Democrats and Republicans on the issue of “equal opportunity” now revolved almost entirely around schooling. The “social and economic supports that are key components of educational success” were increasingly removed from political discussion.⁴⁸ The conservative revolution had waged a conscious political and ideological attack against those social investments and institutions that would lessen inequality and structural disadvantage.

⁴⁶ As cited in Stan Karp, “NCLB’s Selective Vision of Equality: Some Gaps Count More Than Others,” in *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Children and Our Schools*, ed. Deborah Meier and George Wood (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 62.

⁴⁷ Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe, “From New Deal to No Deal: No Child Left Behind and the Devolution of Responsibility for Equal Opportunity,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 76:4 (December 2006), 493.

⁴⁸ Kantor and Lowe, 474.

In an era when other social programs that could take on these tasks (and “big government” in general) were stigmatized, education took on a seeming heroic importance. The “accountability” era of education reform, its significance and its form, is in large part a product of the bipartisan consensus around cutting “big government” and on rejecting earlier solutions to concentrated poverty, urban decay, and inequality. It was only under such conditions that education would become the area of federal policy over which we are so obsessed, which in turn gave increased power to a new array of education advocacy groups to dominate political discourse.

III. Meet the Reformers

Any discussion of the educational reform network must begin with the influence of top philanthropic education foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, all of which award grants to the new wave of education reform advocacy groups, to charter schools, and to school districts willing to implement reform-friendly agendas. These corporate-funded foundations and post-industrial economic elites play a pivotal role in the discourse around the future of education and the workforce. The Gates Foundation, the Walton Family, the Broad Foundation, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) (a Koch Brothers-financed network of state legislators and state legislative aides who work to implement similar anti-union, anti-regulation measures at the state level) have diverse political interests. The Gates Foundation focuses on data-based evaluation of teachers and high-tech innovations in the classroom, and believes that through a more comprehensive, data-driven understanding of “good teaching,” we can improve educational outcomes and

restore equal opportunity. The Broad Foundation, founded by a socially liberal businessman and entrepreneur Eli Broad and his wife Edythe Broad, shares the Gates Foundation's excitement over charter schools and technology in the classroom.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the Walton family and ALEC are ultra-conservative, anti-regulation, and anti-union advocates. Their brand of education reform not only represents an effort to implement high-stakes testing and "accountability," but also often advocates a radical attack on public sector unions coupled with school choice and voucher initiatives. The more conservative of these economic elites envision an education reform that goes hand in hand with austerity politics and the privatization of education.⁵⁰ All in all, Gates, Walton, Broad and other philanthropies have put more than \$600 million into charter schooling.⁵¹

Foundation money began to flow into education as charters assumed greater importance. In 1998 the top four foundations contribution to education were the Annenberg Foundation, the Lily Endowment, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.⁵² But by 2002 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation constituted 25 percent of all funds contributed by the top fifty donors to education in that year.⁵³ While earlier foundations, such as Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie, reviewed proposals submitted to them by school districts, Walton, Broad, and Gates Foundation embodied

⁴⁹ See for example, a detail of the \$23 million they gave away in 2013: "Broad Foundation Invests Nearly \$23 Million in Nonprofits Working to Empower Teachers and Parents with Educational Technologies That Personalize Learning for Every Student," Press release, March 13, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.broadeducation.org/asset/652-130313blendedlearningrelease.pdf>.

⁵⁰ David Sirota, "The Bait and Switch of School 'Reform,'" *Salon*, September 12, 2011, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.salon.com/2011/09/12/reformmoney/>.

⁵¹ Fabricant and Fine, 29.

⁵² Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 199.

⁵³ Ravitch, *The Death and Life*, 199.

“philanthrocapitalism,” expecting their funding to result in charter schools escaping the restrictive norms of school boards and teachers’ unions by adopting the foundation’s new entrepreneurial vision for educational reform. As Joanne Barkan has pointed out in *Dissent Magazine*:

Each year big philanthropy channels about \$1 billion to “ed reform.” This might look like a drop in the bucket compared to the \$525 billion or so that taxpayers spend on K–12 education annually. But discretionary spending—spending beyond what covers ordinary running costs—is where policy is shaped and changed. The mega-foundations use their grants as leverage: they give money to grantees who agree to adopt the foundations’ pet policies. Resource-starved states and school districts feel compelled to say yes to millions of dollars even when many strings are attached or they consider the policies unwise. They are often in desperate straits.⁵⁴

This reality demonstrates the central role that foundation money plays in the behavior of underfunded public institutions. Jonah Edelman, CEO of Stand for Children, a lobbying organization that claims to advocate for the interests of children against hide-bound bureaucrats and teachers unions, sums up the understanding of funders as to the importance of money in educational policy and politics: “We’ve learned the hard way that if you want to have the clout needed to change policies for kids, you have to help politicians get elected. It’s about money, money, money.”⁵⁵ And to illustrate the heavily interconnected nature of the education reformers: Stand for Children is chaired by former Washington D.C. School Superintendent Michelle Rhee and received \$5.2 million from The Gates Foundation between 2003-2011. In Los

⁵⁴ Joanne Barkan, “Plutocrats at Work: How Big Philanthropy Undermines Democracy,” *Dissent Magazine*, 60:4 (Fall 2013), 47-54, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/plutocrats-at-work-how-big-philanthropy-undermines-democracy>.

⁵⁵ As quoted in Joanne Barkan, “Hired Guns on Astroturf: How to Buy and Sell School Reform,” *Dissent Magazine*, 59:2 (Spring 2012), 49-57, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/hired-guns-on-astroturf-how-to-buy-and-sell-school-reform>.

Angeles and elsewhere, they have funded school board and City Council candidates against those backed by teachers unions.⁵⁶

Thus foundations such as Gates, Walton, Broad, were central to moving charters from a small part of the educational reform arsenal of the 1990s to a major focus of today's school reformers and in transforming the educational policy discourse.⁵⁷ Today, hundreds of private philanthropies collectively spend almost \$4 billion annually to support or transform K–12 education, and most of that money is directed to transforming schools that serve low-income children (only religiously-based social service organizations receive more money from foundations).⁵⁸ Education researchers Rand Quinn, Megan Tompkins-Stange, and Debra Meyerson have found that most foundation money no longer goes to traditional public schools, but rather to alternate options such as charter schools or private educational institutions.⁵⁹ In addition, the Gates Foundation had a unique involvement in creating, evaluating, and promoting the Common Core State Standards.⁶⁰

These foundations foot the bill for new education advocacy groups such as Stand for Children, Democrats for Education Reform, StudentsFirst, or Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education.⁶¹ All these organizations are consciously

⁵⁶ Barkan, "Hired Guns on Astroturf: How to Buy and Sell School Reform."

⁵⁷ Fabricant and Fine, 20.

⁵⁸ Joanne Barkan, "Got Dough? How Billionaires Rule Our Schools," *Dissent Magazine*, 58:1 (Winter 2011), 49-57, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/got-dough-how-billionaires-rule-our-schools>.

⁵⁹ Rand Quinn, Megan Tompkins Stange, and Debra Meyerson, "Beyond Grantmaking: Philanthropic Foundations as Agents of Change and Institutional Entrepreneurs," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, published online before print June 24, 2013, accessed March 22, 2014 at <http://www.edweek.org/media/30aera-quinntompkinsstangemeyerson.pdf>. doi: 10.1177/0899764013488836.

⁶⁰ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 23.

⁶¹ Jonathan Pelto, "Funding 'Education Reform': The Big Three Foundations," *Public School Shakedown*, January 5, 2014, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.publicschoolshakedown.org/funding-education-reform>.

opposed to the agendas of teachers' unions, such as tenure and seniority.⁶² These new advocacy groups have made use of bipartisan political support to radically change education agendas in recent years. For instance, Democrats for Education Reform has been a power player in New York education politics since 2006, pushing to raise the state's charter school cap in 2010 as a means to compete for federal Race to the Top funds, of which the state won \$700 million. StudentsFirst spent some \$900,000 last year on lobbying in Michigan, including support for a variety of teacher-quality proposals;⁶³ Stand for Children has lobbied in support of bills revamping teacher evaluation in all ten states in which it has an office.⁶⁴

These advocacy groups help promote the work of the large network of charter school operators such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and the Harlem Success Academies. Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine explain the charter school movement as a tri-partite but interrelated movement. First: free market charters, such as White Hat Managements, K-12, Edison Schools, Inc. Many of these are for-profit corporations and aim for quantity, at times operating dozens of schools in the same district. They move public dollars into private hands and expressly attempt to weaken teachers unions in low-income, disproportionately minority communities.⁶⁵ Second: “Mom and Pop” charters. These charters are typically run by experienced educators

⁶² Stephen Sawchuk, “New Advocacy Groups Shaking Up Education Field,” *Education Week*, May 14, 2012, accessed March 22, 2014, http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/16/31adv-overview_ep.h31.html?tkn=WTOFkEpNebcqRYgEXalebZh0%2BWhwvhCpQHxU&intc=es.

⁶³ “Total Lobbying Expenditures,” accessed March 30, 2014, http://miboecfr.nicusa.com/cgi-bin/cfr/lobby_detail.cgi?caller%3DSRCHRES%26last_match%3D50%26lobby_type%3D*%26lobby_name%3DSTUDENTS%26include%3Dactive%261%3D1%26lobby_id%3D11678%26last_match%3D0.

⁶⁴ Stephen Sawchuk and Sean Cavanagh, “New K-12 Advocacy Groups Wield State-Level Clout,” *Education Week*, May 14, 2012, accessed March 22, 2014, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/16/31adv-state.h31.html?tkn=ZUUFMB15FfHwpQKrUMSn0eyFi8c9%2BkPGAiwZ&print=1>.

⁶⁵ Fabricant and Fine, 21.

frustrated by district bureaucracies; they have deep community roots, and often have cultural or pedagogical focuses that may fill particular niches viewed as unfulfilled in regular public schools. Often associated with progressive educators, such as Deborah Meier (former principal of the teacher-parent governed East Harlem School), these schools are generally friendly to teacher union participation.⁶⁶ Third: Franchise charters, such as Green Dot and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). These charters are run by large non-profit operations attempting to bring charters “to scale.” As opposed to the free market, mass private charter corporations these companies are run by educational policy entrepreneurs who tout their schools as an implementation of a coherent educational theory rather than a primarily market-based ideology. The schools are replicated in a “cookie-cutter” fashion across the country.⁶⁷

Many of the most prominent charter schools operate with a “No Excuses” or “zero tolerance” model that not only dismisses poverty as a barrier to enhanced student performance, but also tends to expel or push out those students with special needs or behavioral problems (who tend to perform worse in school).⁶⁸ They also tend to “cream,” or disproportionately hive off, those students most likely to succeed since simply having the wherewithal to apply to a charter school means that the child already has an active and supportive parent(s). KIPP schools, for example, demand

⁶⁶ Fabricant and Fine, 22.

⁶⁷ Fabricant and Fine, 22.

⁶⁸ For coverage of Success Academies’ “Zero Tolerance” discipline program and its consequences see Juan Gonzalez “Success Academy School Chain Comes Under Fire as Parents Fight ‘Zero Tolerance’ Disciplinary Policy,” *New York Daily News*, August 28, 2013, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/success-academy-fire-parents-fight-disciplinary-policy-article-1.1438753>. For academic study of KIPP’s creaming tendencies and high attrition rates see Gary Miron, Jessica L. Urschel, and Nicholas Saxton, “What Makes KIPP Work? A Study of Student Characteristics, Attrition, and School Finance,” jointly released by National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University and the Study Group on Educational Management Organizations at Western Michigan University, March 2011, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.edweek.org/media/kippstudy.pdf>.

considerable parental involvement in their students' education and will expel students who do not fulfill their "contracts" to do homework or behave properly in school. These charters will demand that their teachers be available to help students with homework via e-mail and phone until 9 PM on weekdays and during much of the weekend.⁶⁹ Charter school growth has only been expanded through the incentives offered in Obama's Race to the Top legislation.⁷⁰

The reformers' assertion that teachers are the problem and that better managerial techniques are the answer has led to the creation of a number of "alternative teacher and principal recruiters" such as Teach for America (TFA), The New Teacher Project, New Leaders, The Broad Superintendents Academy, and the Broad Residency in Urban Education. These programs aim to provide fast-track programs that train teachers and principals. New Leaders, formerly known as New Leaders for New Schools, offers an alternative path to the usual training and experience needed to become a school principal. The Broad Superintendents Academy "is a 10-month executive management training program run by The Broad Center to prepare top leaders from education, military, business, nonprofit and government sectors to lead urban public school systems."⁷¹ TFA was originally founded with the intent of deploying graduates from elite colleges to poorer school districts that faced teacher shortages. Interestingly, austerity-driven layoffs have

⁶⁹ Fabricant and Fine, 21-22.

⁷⁰ Race to the Top required states to lift their caps on charter schools if they were to receive money from the fund. See: "States Open to Charters Start Fast in 'Race to Top,'" June 8, 2009, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/06/06082009a.html>.

⁷¹ "Senior Military, Corporate and Education Executives Selected for Superintendents Academy," Press Release, February 8, 2011, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.broadfoundation.org/asset/1165-110208tbanewclass.pdf>.

shifted TFA's role in many metropolitan school districts. As history professor Andrew Hartman wrote in *Jacobin Magazine*:

Following the economic collapse of 2008, which contributed to school revenue problems nationwide, massive teacher layoffs became the new norm, including in districts where teacher shortages had provided an entry to TFA in the past. Thousands of Chicago teachers, for instance, have felt the sting of layoffs and furloughs in the past two years, even as the massive Chicago Public School system, bound by contract, continues to annually hire a specified number of TFA corps members. In the face of these altered conditions, the TFA public relations machine now deemphasizes teacher shortages and instead accentuates one crucial adjective: "quality." In other words, schools in poor urban and rural areas of the country might not suffer from a shortage of teachers in general, but they lack for the *quality* teachers that Kopp's organization provides.⁷²

The data on TFA is mixed: some studies have found that TFA teachers get about the same results as other, new, uncertified teachers; some tests show them helping students achieve small gains in math but not reading test scores⁷³ This has not stopped TFA from standing at the front of education reform, helping to staff the growing non-union, privately managed charter schools in so many of our nation's cities.⁷⁴

Hostility towards teachers' unions is now a central part of the bipartisan education agenda. The website www.teachersunionsexposed.com, a special project of the Center for Union Facts, offers the traditional party line that teachers unions keep "a tight grip on policies (and policy makers)," and thus "stop and deter efforts to bring about education reform and alternative systems." Unions are said to use poverty as an excuse for their poor performance as educators. Many of the new education advocacy groups have been central to crafting policies that decrease job security for teachers or increase the use of merit pay and standardized testing as a component of

⁷² Andrew Hartman, "Teach for America: The Hidden Curriculum of Liberal Do-Gooders," *Jacobin Magazine*, accessed March 23, 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/12/teach-for-america/>.

⁷³ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 137.

⁷⁴ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 140.

teacher evaluation. For example, in several states, such as Illinois and Massachusetts, StudentsFirst has had a representative on panels that have written regulations governing the evaluation of teachers.⁷⁵

Finally, the celebritization of the education reform debate has entailed high-profile coverage of those allegedly heroic superintendents prepared to push the education reform agenda in major metropolitan areas. Most famously this includes Joel Klein of New York and Michelle Rhee of Washington, D.C. Klein served as chancellor of the New York City Department of Education from 2002-2011. He transformed the city's public-school system by promoting charter schools (to replace regular public schools), by increasing the importance of standardized testing and their consequences for principals and teachers, and by attacking union-sponsored due process and seniority provisions for teachers.⁷⁶

This amalgamation of foundations, advocacy groups, charter schools, and superintendents have been featured in popular culture in trade press books such as Steven Brill's *Class Warfare*, Paul Tough's *Whatever It Takes*, and mass-released films such as *Waiting for Superman* and *Parent Trigger*. The education reformers represented in popular culture share the belief, as John Schnur (executive chairman of America Achieves and co-founder of New Leaders) puts it in Brill's *Class Warfare*, that "truly effective teaching... [can] overcome student indifference, parental disengagement, and poverty" and that through reforms to the educational system

⁷⁵ Sawchuk and Cavanagh, "New K-12 Advocacy Groups Wield State-Level Clout."

⁷⁶ Richard Rothstein, "Joel Klein's Misleading Autobiography," *The American Prospect*, October 11, 2012, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://prospect.org/article/joel-kleins-misleading-autobiography>.

“demography will no longer be destiny.”⁷⁷ According to Brill, “[School reformers argue the larger significance of charter schools is that the ones that work not only demonstrate that children from the most challenged homes and communities can learn but also suggest how traditional public schools might be changed to make them operate effectively.”⁷⁸ The reformers, moreover, have been successful in permeating mainstream politics. Many of today’s key reform advocates are closely tied to the Obama administration, particularly Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Chicago mayor and former Obama White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel.

IV. The Two Claims of Contemporary Education Reform

The reformers are united by a commitment to education as the central vehicle for achieving equality of opportunity and restoring American competitiveness in the global economy. The consensus around education reform rests on a shared faith that education can do two things: 1) overcome any disadvantages between the privileged and the impoverished and create genuine equality of opportunity; and 2) restore American competitiveness, and give all Americans the ability to succeed in the 21st-century labor market.

For the reformers, progress in our education system can ensure that “demography is not destiny.” On the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan spoke as to how “education is the civil rights issue of our generation.”⁷⁹ In that speech he described the Civil Rights movement and

⁷⁷ Steven Brill, *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 2.

⁷⁸ Brill, 9.

⁷⁹ Arne Duncan, “Remarks at School Without Walls on Anniversary of March on Washington” (speech, Washington D.C., August 27, 2013), U.S. Department of Education, accessed 23 March,

argued that integration had been won, and that the problem now lies elsewhere: “integration alone doesn't guarantee a world-class education,” he noted.⁸⁰ His speech exemplifies the blind eye of the education reform movement to continued racial and, more important perhaps, socio-economic segregation. For the reformers the solution to inequality of opportunity does not lie in integration or in fighting to eliminate poverty. Instead they insist on bringing quality education (and quality educators) to our worst neighborhoods.⁸¹ Their silence, admittedly, is part of a broader societal obliviousness to continued segregation, despite the fact, as Gary Orfield has shown, that “de-facto segregation” is stronger than it has been since the 1970s.⁸²

There are certain breeds of education reformers that acknowledge anti-poverty and community reinvestment measures as central to education initiatives. Most famously, Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone has organized large sums of philanthropy money to provide successful “wraparound services.” These services entail supportive workshops for parents with children ages 0-3, pre-kindergarten programs, health clinics, and community centers for children and adults during after-school, weekend, and summer hours; they also include youth violence prevention efforts, social services, and support during and after the college application process. However, this wing of the reform movement has not succeeded in shifting the tone of the education reformers to calling for the massive public investment that would be needed to scale-up such relatively small successes. Comprehensive “wraparound

2014, <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/arne-duncan-remarks-school-without-walls-anniversary-march-washington>.

⁸⁰ Duncan, “Remarks at School Without Walls.”

⁸¹ Richard D. Kahlenberg has been particularly oppositional to the education reformers’ silence on the need for socio-economic integration. See: Richard D. Kahlenberg, *The Future of School Integration: Socioeconomic Diversity as an Education Reform Strategy* (New York: Century Foundation, 2012).

⁸² Gary Orfield and Nora Gordon, *Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, 2001), 29.

services” may be a strategic demand that could be used to revive the War on Poverty, but we need to be serious about the redistribution of income and wealth that that would require. In 2004 Richard Rothstein, estimated that such public investments would cost an annual \$156 billion dollars.⁸³ This is a small percentage of GDP, but a serious investment when compared with cheap commitments to “accountability.”

The conservative (and more publicly prevalent) wing of the education reformers tends to make two distinct claims about poverty: they either claim that poverty is “no excuse” for a barrier to successful educational performance, or they claim that poverty is a problem for a different breed of “reformers.”⁸⁴ Irvin Scott, a representative of the Gates Foundation, took part in a five-part exchange with educator, blogger, and activist Anthony Cody about poverty and education reform. He prefaced his final exchange with the typical “No Excuses” understanding of poverty:

Simply, I believe all children can learn. I believe low-income children of color can learn when they have great teachers who believe in them, and treat them with the same passion, enthusiasm and intellectual rigor that they would treat their own children. And I believe in the skill and will of teachers, provided they are given the opportunity to teach, learn and lead as true professionals...I want to believe that Mr. Cody believes this same truth about students, yet in each post he carefully marshals an assortment of facts and statistics which seems to suggest that he believes that children living in poverty cannot learn and that until the status quo changes we should lower our expectations for poor children.⁸⁵

⁸³ Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-white Achievement Gap* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2004), 144-46. Rothstein’s estimates are based, in part, off of the calculations done by plaintiffs in a New York State Court of Appeals case arguing that the state’s financing system was unconstitutional because it did not give lower-class children the opportunity to achieve middle-class-level skills.

⁸⁴ For Michelle Rhee’s explanation of the debate between those who emphasize poverty and those who “fight to put students first,” see Michelle Rhee, *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 209.

⁸⁵ Irvin Scott, “The Gates Foundation Responds: The Role of the Marketplace in Education,” *Education Week Teacher*, September 13, 2012, accessed March 24, 2013, http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2012/09/the_gates_foundation_responds.html.

This point exemplifies the “No Excuses” mantra of “poverty is not destiny.” But at times, generally when pushed on their silence on poverty or their belief that it is not consequential to educational opportunity, reformers will insist that poverty may be a problem, but not a problem to be tackled by the education reformers. Michelle Rhee, for instance, advances this opinion in a 2012 *Huffington Post* op-ed “Poverty Must Be Tackled But Never Used As An Excuse.”⁸⁶ When she appeared on *All In With Chris Hayes* in 2013 she was pressed on the societal importance of tackling poverty:

Chris Hayes: We have seen a tremendous national debate [about education reform]. We have seen billions, and billions, and billions of philanthropic dollars thrown into this question. We have seen hedge funds giving tons of money to make sure that teachers are held accountable, that we have high standards... It seems to me that there is not the same level of attention – from the philanthropic community, from our political class – that [poverty] is a huge threat to the success of these kids.

Michelle Rhee: Well I think that, you know, different people have different interests. And I certainly think that, for example, something like child nutrition and child hunger have over the last several years gained tremendous steam. And people understand that when kids come to school hungry that makes a huge difference in their ability to learn. So you’ve got advocates who think that is incredibly important, and who are pouring a ton of resources into that. And that is an absolutely worthy cause. As an educator I would say that because we are with children for a significant portion of their days and of their years, that we should also be doing everything in our power to make sure that the schooling environment that they are in gives them the skills they need to be successful in life. To say that you have a lot of people are pouring money into things... does that mean they’re ignoring other things? No.⁸⁷

The argument presented by this key educational reformer states that the choice between improving teachers and solving poverty is a false dichotomy; as a society, we should do both, but meanwhile the education reformers will focus exclusively on

⁸⁶ Michelle Rhee, “Poverty Must Be Tackled But Never Used As An Excuse,” *Huffington Post*, September 5, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-rhee/poverty-must-be-tackled-b_b_1857423.html.

⁸⁷ Michelle Rhee, “America’s Inequality Problem,” *All in With Chris Hayes*, MSNBC, December 4, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.msnbc.com/all-in/watch/americas-inequality-problem-80704579613>.

improving teacher quality. Poverty is for another group of activists and policy-makers to redress.

When contrasted with New Deal liberalism and Civil Rights era policies, our contemporary politics leans heavily on the hope that education reform alone will restore equality of opportunity. Stan Karp, director of the Secondary Reform Project for New Jersey's Education Law Center, noted in the aftermath of No Child Left Behind the irony that “there is no indicator of equality—including household income, child poverty rates, health care coverage, home ownership, or school spending—where federal policy currently mandates equality among all population groups within twelve years under threat of sanctions—except standardized tests in public schools.”⁸⁸ I will criticize the reform movement’s assumptions about the nature of poverty and concentrated poverty in this country, and question the ability of education reform to overcome the challenges that poverty poses in Chapter Two.

Secondly, the reformers tell us that education is necessary to skill up all American workers for the 21st century’s global economy. Reformers assert that education is one of the best anti-poverty tools, claiming at least implicitly that poverty is largely the result of a lack of education and labor market skills.⁸⁹ Beginning in the 1980s Americans began to put a renewed emphasis on education because of a fear of the new “skill economy.”⁹⁰ The “New Covenant” of the Clinton Third Way insisted that the Democratic Party had to prepare workers for the new skill- and knowledge-

⁸⁸ Karp, 60.

⁸⁹ Barack Obama, “Remarks By the President in State of the Union Address” (speech, Washington D.C., January 27, 2010), The White House, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

⁹⁰ Aronowitz, “The New Conservative Discourse,” in *Education and the American Dream: Conservatives, Liberals, & Radicals Debate the Future of Education*, ed. Harvey Holtz (Granby, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1989), 203-204.

based economy. When Michael J. Petrilli, vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, reviewed Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* in 2006, he wrote the book "could have been the most influential prod to education reform since *A Nation at Risk*," even though the book, as he notes, is not explicitly about education, but about globalization and technological advancements⁹¹

In 2006, George W. Bush celebrated the achievements of No Child Left Behind for its contributions to America's prosperity:

No Child Left Behind Act... is an important way to make sure America remains competitive in the 21st century. We're living in a global world. See, the education system in America must compete with education systems in China and India. If we fail to give our students the skills necessary to compete in the world of the 21st century, the jobs will go elsewhere. That's just a fact of life. It's the reality of the world in which we live. And therefore, now is the time for the United States of America to give our children the skills so that the jobs will stay here.⁹²

Increasingly reformers pushed education as central to economic prosperity in a "skills-based economy."⁹³ In an Educational Testing Service report from 2003 titled "Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform," researchers Anthony Carnevale and Donna Desrochers described the fervor around education reform as stemming from the loss of middle-skill, well-paying jobs: "For most Americans, education and training through and beyond high school is now a necessary condition

⁹¹ Michael J. Petrilli, "If the World Is Flat," review of *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, by Thomas L. Friedman, *Education Next*, Winter 2006, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://educationnext.org/if-the-world-is-flat>.

⁹² George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses No Child Left Behind" (speech, Washington D.C., October 5, 2006), The White House, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061005-6.html>.

⁹³ McGuinn, 148.

(not just the most advantageous or desirable route) for developing skills required by most well-paying jobs.”⁹⁴

The emphasis on the “skills-economy” has linked education to discussions of income inequality. Reformers, politicians, and business elites insist that everything from low-wage work, increasing inequality, and unemployment is the result of a lack of worker skills and education. Michelle Rhee, in her interview on *All in With Chris Hayes*, cited the “mismatch” between employers and workers:

Talk to American employers, they will tell you that they have problems finding people with the skills and the knowledge that they need to fill some of their mission critical jobs. And yet we have the unemployment rate we have today. That means that there is a mismatch between our public education system and what the employers of tomorrow are going to need from their workforce.⁹⁵

When politicians claim that low-wages and unemployment are the result of a lack of skills, education becomes the answer, rather than macro-economic policies, or proposals aimed at raising the wages of all workers. As historian Colin Gordon has noted, when we ascribe low-wages to the purportedly poor supply of skills (education), discussions of inequality come to center on education reform. This took place more and more beginning in the 1980s:

If nothing else, this is a politically-attractive kind of explanation for inequality. Technological innovation or change (like globalization) is not something you can control, so there seems little political recourse but to occasionally lament the quality of American education. This, in turn, is appealing to left and right—as it yields either a fierce egalitarian defense of public education, or unrelenting attacks on schools and teachers.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers, *Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 2003), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.learndoeearn.org/for-educators/Standards-for-What.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Michelle Rhee, Interview with Chris Hayes, “America’s Inequality Problem.”

⁹⁶ Colin Gordon, “Growing Apart: A Political History of American Inequality,” accessed March 23, 2014 at <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/the-computer-did-it-skill-based-technological-change>.

Thus reformers portray education as not only the answer to inequality of opportunity but also inequality of outcome. Proper education reform will purportedly breed prosperity for all and will reduce income inequality that is caused by higher returns to useful “skills” and/or education. The economic analysis I will explore in Chapter Three examines the claim that there is a growing gap between the demand for skills (caused by technological change) and the supply of skills (shaped by educational attainment and policy).

Ultimately the education reformers emerged at a time when both major American parties failed to address the root causes of concentrated poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Political elites’ support for education reform arose within a Democratic Party leadership “Third Way paradigm shift” that followed in response to the “Reagan-Thatcher revolution.” This shift from New Deal liberalism to a bipartisan “neoliberal” consensus favored decreasing funding for public goods and making programs more “accountable” and “efficient” by using market mechanisms and identifying measurable outcomes. Thus the very political viability of charters, merit pay, and attacks on public sector unions, as well as an increased consensus that government’s interest was big business’s interest, spurred the widespread philanthropic investment in the new accountability-driven education reform.⁹⁷ We cannot disentangle the current education reform movement’s policy proposals from the dominant market ideology of neoliberalism—an ideology that proposes that all services and goods are best distributed through market mechanisms, preferably one’s “free” from government bureaucracy and regulation. As Michael Fabricant and

⁹⁷ Stanley Aronowitz, “The New Conservative Discourse,” 203-204.

Michelle Fine write, “Legitimizing the deregulation of government functions such as public schooling is largely achieved through the discourse of a naturalized ideological truth about the effectiveness of market reform.”⁹⁸ If there were no such ultra-faith in market principles, we would not have the particular bipartisan brand of education reform we have today.

More important, without the concomitant de-legitimization of “big government” and social investment, education reform would not be so central to policy discussions of how to best create genuine equality of opportunity and to alleviate inequality. As government slimmed down, education became the realm in which politicians could express their interest in restoring equality of opportunity, tackling poverty, improve labor market outcomes, and limit inequality. These education reform measures, culminating in No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, stood as a “grand bargain” between moderate Democrats and mainstream pro-business Republicans.⁹⁹ But these bipartisan proposals have formalized a new “Third Way” Democratic mainstream leadership in American politics that has all but abandoned social-democratic proposals for helping the poor and working class in favor of an obsession over education reform. The ability of education reformers to maintain their prominence in discussions of poverty and inequality reflects the current political rejection of more comprehensive policies aimed at achieving social and economic justice. The next two chapters investigate in greater detail whether reforms to education can be expected to achieve either equality of opportunity or greater equality of outcomes.

⁹⁸ Fabricant and Fine, 63.

⁹⁹ McGuinn, 144.

Chapter 2: Restoring Opportunity in America: A Micro and Macro Understanding of The Challenges Poor Students Face

I. Education Reformers' Shallow Understanding of Poverty

The education reform movement's primary claim is that a transformation of K-12 education can restore equality of opportunity in the United States. The reformers believe that schools can overcome the disadvantages that young children inherit from their parents and from the broader communities in which they live. This is not a new claim for the American public. We, compared to more social democratic European nations, have always accepted greater levels of inequality alongside an abiding faith that a robust school system would provide equality of opportunity.¹⁰⁰ But in light of recent evidence that social mobility has always been relatively low in the United States, we need to reconsider the role that schools can—and cannot—play in promoting equality of opportunity.¹⁰¹ Thus this chapter examines the extent to which our schools can overcome the structural barriers to academic achievement faced by poor and minority students.

This chapter offers a broader sociological understanding of poverty than that provided by the education reform discourse. The conception of poverty advanced in this chapter portrays how poverty affects the economic, social, and cultural life of low-income families, their children, and the neighborhoods in which they live. In discussing the practices of different social classes and the ways these practices

¹⁰⁰ Jennifer L. Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.

¹⁰¹ Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez, and Nicholas Turner, "Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 19844, January 2014, accessed April 6, 2014, http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty/mobility_trends.pdf.

reproduce poverty through the family, I will be discussing some of the “cultural manifestations” of poverty. The right often refers to such behavior as the “culture of poverty,” claiming that many poor people are “undeserving” since their poverty results from their making bad choices such as not staying in school. By conceptualizing poverty as following from the cultural values of the poor, conservative thinkers are able to criticize social welfare and “big government” as ineffective at best, and counterproductive at worst.¹⁰² It is true that the stresses of poverty (especially concentrated poverty) can, in fact, engender higher rates of unhealthy “cultural” practices among the poor: alcoholism, drug use, and smoking, as well as well as child rearing practices that do not promote the complex analytical thought that helps upper class children thrive in schools. In reality, however, poverty and its “cultural manifestations” are primarily the result of structural and material disadvantages: beyond the instability that comes from low incomes and a lack of wealth, poor and working-class American families are less likely to have access to quality health, dental, and child care; they are more likely to move frequently from one home to another, thus moving children from school to school; and they are more likely to live in homes and neighborhoods that expose their children to lead paint and poor quality air that contribute to disproportionately high rates of asthma. The poor are also more likely to live in neighborhoods where violence and gangs are a daily reality, and where unemployment soars high above the national average.

Within the education reform movement, discussions of the adverse effects of poverty on children’s performance in school are either absent or simplistic. Especially

¹⁰² Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

central to this chapter is a discussion of how living in communities of intensely concentrated poverty has a particularly deleterious effect on the life opportunities of both adults and their children. This is an important social phenomenon to explore because the education reform movement focuses so intensely on our schools in our urban centers.¹⁰³ William Julius Wilson, the leading sociologist working on urban poverty, describes inner city poverty as a crisis of decaying communities and joblessness.¹⁰⁴ The poor suffer not only from lower socio-economic status, but also from a lack of the community safeguards, job networks, and cultural resources characteristic of middle-class American suburbs:

The key theoretical concept, therefore, is not *culture of poverty* but social isolation. Culture of poverty implies that basic values and attitudes of the ghetto subculture have been internalized and thereby influence behavior. Accordingly, efforts to enhance the life chances of groups such as the ghetto underclass require, from this perspective, social policies (e.g., programs of training and education as embodied in mandatory workfare) aimed at directly changing these subcultural traits. Social isolation, on the other hand, not only implies that contact between groups of different class and/or racial backgrounds is either lacking or has become increasingly intermittent but that the nature of this contact enhances the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area... To emphasize the concept of social isolation does not mean that cultural traits are irrelevant in understanding behavior; rather, it

¹⁰³ This is clear simply from media portrayals and based on the empirical reality that many of our struggling school districts are in our urban centers defined by concentrated, multi-generational poverty. For an open acknowledgement of this, see David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute Press, 2008). See also David Whitman, "An Appeal to Authority," *Education Next*, 8:4 (Fall 2008), accessed March 30, 2014, <http://educationnext.org/an-appeal-to-authority/>. Whitman argues that successful education reform exhibits "new paternalism," a term coined by Lawrence Mead in his 1997 book on welfare reform, *The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty*. Whitman argues that successful schools take urban, impoverished kids and teach them to walk quietly in the halls, sit up straight, and they give the kids the cultural capital that middle class children inherit from their parents. Admittedly, all schools in a democratic society are in some sense paternalistic, and what we paternalistically choose to teach is important. The deeper problem, as I outline in this chapter, is a belief that such culture-driven school reforms (aimed primarily at black youth) take priority over social expenditure aimed at neighborhood renewal, anti-poverty programs, and comprehensive social services necessary. Without the latter, the former becomes a form of punitive paternalism.

¹⁰⁴ William Julius Wilson, "The Underclass," in *The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. William Julius Wilson (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 20.

highlights the fact that *culture is a response to social structural constraints and opportunities*.¹⁰⁵

When reformers claim that poverty should be “No Excuse” for poor student performance, they tap into a broader American misconception that poverty is simply a matter of a family having less money. In reality, poverty has diverse economic, social, and cultural manifestations in familial structure and communal institutions. In his 1994 best seller *Race Matters*, Cornel West argues that American poverty involves a complex interaction between adverse material circumstances faced by the poor, the resulting weakening of communal institutions, and the development of negative social practices such as the drug trade.¹⁰⁶ These three aspects of poverty, he argues, interact with each other to condition individual life opportunities. West rails against the conservative belief that the only causal factor promoting generational poverty is the moral depravity of the poor; because such a view leads people to believe that “what is needed is a change in the moral behavior of poor black urban dwellers.... [It] highlights immoral actions while ignoring public responsibility for the immoral circumstances that haunt our fellow citizens.”¹⁰⁷

The recent focus of the education reform movement on “grit” (the subject of Paul Tough’s new book called *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*), which refers to non-cognitive traits such as conscientiousness, resilience, or the ability to delay gratification, reproduces this

¹⁰⁵ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Under Class, and Public Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 61. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁶ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York, Vintage Books: 1994), 86-88.

¹⁰⁷ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 4-5.

focus on the cultural effects rather than the structural causes of poverty.¹⁰⁸ As Lauren Anderson, Professor of Education at Connecticut College, wrote in a blog for *Education Week*, the reformers' trending call to focus on "grit" and "self-control" is "an appealing policy target for those who believe that if we could just cultivate the 'right' qualities among the 'low-achieving' then they would be able to transcend conditions of poverty and other obstacles in their way."¹⁰⁹

While black poverty is subject to a particularly stereotyped representation within American public discourse, conservative analysts increasingly promote a similar misreading of the dialectic between the material and the cultural in analyzing the causes of emerging mass poverty among whites in deindustrialized communities. This is exemplified by Charles Murray's 2012 book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, which argues that the rise in white poverty over the last 50 years is the result of the white "New Lower Class" losing its religiosity, work ethic, industriousness, and nuclear family structure.¹¹⁰ In Murray's view, white working class America has lost the Protestant (and Catholic immigrant) work ethic that Murray believes characterized these communities until the permissive welfare state reforms of the 1960s. But his argument fails to recognize that these "cultural manifestations" of poverty are the result of the "New Lower Class" suffering from

¹⁰⁸ Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

¹⁰⁹ Lauren Anderson, "Grit, Galton, and Eugenics," *Education Week*, March 21, 2014, accessed March 30, 2014, http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2014/03/lauren_anderson_grit.html. As I mentioned in footnote 10, given Tough's work, I believe he believes that "grit" can only be cultivated if education makes broad interventions that tackle concentrated poverty (eliminating what he calls "toxic stress.") Anderson's analysis gets out how the focus "grit" can enter the policy discourse and lose the focus on poverty.

¹¹⁰ Charles A. Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

similar sorts of rapid deindustrialization from the 1980s onwards that just a decade earlier devastated the Black and Latino working class, particularly male industrial workers.¹¹¹

Thus this chapter seeks to reintroduce a focus on the structural causes of poverty into the education reform debate. Unfortunately, Wilson and West's theories as to the dynamic interaction of the structural causes and cultural manifestations of poverty are absent from contemporary political debate. At the same time that Wilson and West called for Marshall Plan-like investment and job creation for our inner cities, a bipartisan political consensus emerged that government spending could not alleviate poverty. This neoliberal policy consensus embraced fiscal belt-tightening (though only for domestic social spending), deregulation, and attacking long-term deficits, as the way to promote job growth. Wilson and West's social democratic analysis of the deleterious effects of concentrated poverty on the lives of the poor disappeared from mainstream policy discourse, and education reform became a part of broader social policy aimed at dealing with the social consequences of urban poverty.

Of course, not all education reformers are guilty of negligence when it comes to expanding anti-poverty programs and dealing seriously with the difficulties of concentrated poverty. Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children Zone's vision of schools

¹¹¹ Daniel Denvir, "The Right-Wing Propagandist Charles Murray Exposes the Truth About Conservatives," review of *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, by Charles A. Murray, *AlterNet*, February 13, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.alternet.org/story/154119/the_right-wing_propagandist_charles_murray_exposes_the_truth_about_conservatives_-_they_hate_poor_people,_white_and_black; Timothy Noah, "The Two Americas," review of *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, by Charles A. Murray, *The New Republic*, February 20, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/book/review/charles-murray-white-america>.

as providing “wraparound services” consciously aims to provide families with anti-poverty programs as well as to rebuild communal institutions and supportive networks. While such a vision is honorable and perhaps a roadmap for future reform, Canada rarely, if ever, discusses the public investment that would be necessary to scale up his project in order to reach every low-income community in the United States. Thus this chapter will briefly conclude by engaging in a discussion as to how we can find the public resources necessary to eliminate widespread poverty.

Ultimately, in contrast to Canada’s calls for trimming Social Security and Medicare benefits in order to fund our children’s future, I note that there is no reason to pit the young against the old and that we can fund wraparound services through progressive taxation on corporations and the wealthy (or even non-progressive forms such as the value-added tax), coupled with defense budget cuts. Only by addressing inequality of wealth can we dismantle the very social and economic inequalities that prevent the fulfillment of equality of opportunity (see Chapter Four). Ultimately, however, it would be an improvement if we could shift the political debate to where we argue over how we will fund and universalize Canada’s socially conscious education reform, rather than give predominant focus to “internal” school and teaching reforms.

II. The Role of Schools in Providing Equal Opportunity: A Historical Debate

Contemporary debates about the relationship between racial and socio-economic inequality and educational opportunity began with the 1966 publication of *Equality of Educational Opportunity* by sociologist James Coleman and his colleagues.¹¹² The “Coleman Report,” as it came to be known, argued that differences

¹¹² James S. Coleman *et al.*, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), accessed April 6, 2014, <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED012275>.

among schools in financial resources were not nearly as great as expected, and that the impact of those school resources on student achievement was small compared to the impact of students' family backgrounds and the influence of peers.¹¹³ The report led to a generation of school reformers advocating increased integration of schools by race and class, with busing as a more readily acceptable social policy than integration of neighborhoods by public funding of low-income housing in affluent suburbs.¹¹⁴ Despite the fact that the Coleman report in no way argued that schools make “no difference” in the educational and life opportunities of their students, the policy community at times has read it that way.¹¹⁵

Christopher Jencks and his colleagues made a similar contribution to educational sociology in 1972 with their *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. Jencks and his research team argued that there was little correlation between income and the quality of schooling one received, and that school reform could no longer be regarded as an effective means of equalizing income. Focusing on increases in the quality of schooling proved an ineffective means for decreasing inequality, Jencks' work argued, as school outcomes tended to reproduce the educational capital of students' parents.¹¹⁶ The middle class perpetuates

¹¹³ Coleman *et al.*, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. “Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.”

¹¹⁴ Robert D. McFadden, “Dr. James Coleman, 68, Dies; Work Helped to Foster Busing,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 1995, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/28/obituaries/dr-james-coleman-68-dies-work-helped-to-foster-busing.html>.

¹¹⁵ David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 1995), 71-74.

¹¹⁶ Christopher Jencks *et al.*, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

itself not solely by handing down its economic advantages intact but by implanting in the young attitudes about educational attainment that keep them in school until they have acquired the credentials necessary for middle-class jobs. Thus, if we wish to redress inequality, Jencks argued, we should do so via policies that enhance the social wage (a more extensive, universal welfare state) and measures that lessen inequalities in the labor market (a higher minimum wage and stronger labor rights).¹¹⁷

Since the publication of these studies, researchers have continued to reexamine the evidence and fervently debate how they, and the Coleman report in particular, withstood various critiques. In 1972 Daniel Moynihan and Frederick Mosteller noted that the most important finding of the Coleman report was that there was relatively little variation in the resources—money, teachers, teacher credentials, libraries, etc.—for black and white schools.¹¹⁸ This scant variation limits the extent to which school resources can explain differences in achievement between black and white students. Many scholars have disagreed with the claim that quality of school resources does not vary considerably between suburban, urban, and rural school districts. Newer studies uncovered a moderate effect for school resources on student outcomes, based on evidence that differences in teacher’s salaries and smaller class sizes correlate with differences in student performance.¹¹⁹ But they also note that the specific qualities of schools that produce improved outcomes are hard to determine. Yet in many ways the education reform movement is based upon identifying these

¹¹⁷ Christopher Jencks *et al*, *Inequality*, 261-65.

¹¹⁸ Frederick Mosteller and Daniel P. Moynihan, *On Equality of Educational Opportunity* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

¹¹⁹ Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, *The Black-white Test Score Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998). 9-10; Adam Gamoran and Daniel A. Long, “Equality of Educational Opportunity: A 40-Year Retrospective,” Working Paper No. 2006–9 (Madison: Wisconsin Center For Education Research, 2006).

qualities and then implementing them in our “failing” schools. It has avoided the calls for equal funding (or extra funding for poor districts) that were typical of the “equity” reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s.¹²⁰

In the 1960s, racial egalitarians, inspired by the Coleman and Jencks’ reports, blamed the test score gap on the combined effects of black poverty, racial segregation, and the underfunding of black schools. Thus they called for raising black children’s family income, desegregating their schools, and equalizing funding of schools that remained racially segregated.¹²¹ All of these measures were partially undertaken: America created a black middle class, and we increased funding for the most disadvantaged school districts; we succeeded in desegregating schools in the South (though much less so in the North).¹²²

Despite the only partial fulfillment of these goals, in the late 1970s the public policy discourse over how to tackle racial and class inequality began to change radically. Efforts to desegregate schools across suburban-urban lines largely ended after the United States Supreme Court in 1974 ruled in *Milliken v. Bradley* that state courts could not mandate busing across school district lines.¹²³ Considerable scholarly evidence found that many anti-poverty programs, such as Head Start, the Job Corps, Medicaid, and Food Stamps had succeeded in lowering poverty rates – and could

¹²⁰ For studies that emphasize the inequality of school funding see: Paul Barton, *Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2003); Berliner and Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis*; Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991); Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Resurrection of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown, 2005); Darling-Hammond, “From ‘Separate but Equal’ to ‘No Child Left Behind,’” 6.

¹²¹ Jencks and Phillips, 9.

¹²² Jencks and Phillips, 9; Orfield and Gordon, *Schools More Separate*, 29. In 1954, 99.99% of Southern Blacks were enrolled in schools that were composed of 50–100% minority students. This percentage declined to 86.1% in 1967–68 and reached a low of 57.1% in 1986–87, but then rose to 67.3% by 1998–99.

¹²³ *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

have been more successful if better funded and more focused on the creation of productive, well-paying jobs – but the Johnson administration’s commitment to fighting for such funding took backstage to financing the war in Vietnam.¹²⁴ As a result of our persisting inability to tackle the structural causes of the black-white achievement gap, conservative (and often genetic-based) explanations for the black-white test score gap increasingly took on weight in the public discourse, claiming that public policy had tried (and allegedly failed) to redress poverty and segregation, the prior accepted explanations for racial inequality in educational outcomes.¹²⁵ This form of analysis culminated in conservative scholars Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein arguing in their best-selling book *The Bell Curve* that any remaining inequalities were “natural,” despite a broad consensus among sociologists that the differences in educational achievement between blacks and whites stemmed from structural inequalities in both the educational system and in broader economic and social life.¹²⁶

Coleman, Jencks, and those arguing for equitable funding of schools centered their analysis of public education in a broader context of anti-poverty measures. They pointed to the deleterious effects that segregation and inequality of income had on school performance of lower income students, particularly African-Americans. Jencks’ and Coleman’s work did argue that even the most equitably funded and integrated schools would reproduce class inequality due to the cultural capital

¹²⁴ Michael Harrington, *The New American Poverty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984); James T. Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Jill S. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹²⁵ Rutledge M. Dennis, “Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 64:3 (Summer 1995), 243-52. See also Jencks and Phillips, 10-11.

¹²⁶ For work directly responding to Murray and Herrnstein, see Jencks and Phillips, *The Black-White Test Score Gap*.

conveyed to students by their families. Thus they called for balancing educational policy with a set of social policy programs aimed at redressing inequality itself (rather than just redressing inequality of opportunity in education). Jencks, in particular, advocated a social democratic agenda of expanding universal public provision of child care and health care and altering labor law and other public policy so as to strengthen the bargaining power of low-wage workers – policies that are today even more relevant of consideration, given the proliferation of low-wage service jobs.

Today’s education reform debate, by contrast, would benefit from an understanding of the great strains put on our school system as alleged agents for upward mobility in an America severely stratified by race and socio-economic status. Thus the next section of this chapter returns to a focus on the effects that poverty and socio-economic segregation have on student educational performance. Only then can we astutely evaluate whether the proposed solutions of the education reform movement adequately address the effect of persistent inequalities on children’s life opportunities, and have a more fruitful debate about what role education can play in America’s quest for greater equality of opportunity.

III. Comprehending America’s Persisting Inequalities: Poverty’s Effects on the Individual and on the Family

Recent evidence demonstrates that the academic achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families has risen substantially in recent decades in the U.S., as has the disparity in college completion rates by family income.¹²⁷ Indeed, the achievement gap across the parental income-level of students is now much larger than the black-white achievement gap, a reversal from the pattern 50

¹²⁷ Sean Reardon, “No Rich Child Left Behind,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2013, accessed May 26, 2014, <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/no-rich-child-left-behind/>>.

years ago, when black-white educational disparities exceeded socioeconomic disparities (though the black-white achievement gap remains real and problematic for those concerned with educational equality)¹²⁸

Social class is highly determinative of which children come to school prepared to read and think analytically. Young children of educated parents are read to at home more consistently and are encouraged to read more to themselves when they are older.¹²⁹ Most children whose parents have college degrees are read to daily before they begin kindergarten, but few children whose parents have only a high school diploma or less are exposed to such daily reading.¹³⁰ Middle-class parents who are more literate are more likely to ask questions when they read to their children, especially questions that engage the child's imagination, such as, "What do you think will happen next?"¹³¹ As a result children enter schools with different levels of vocabulary and cognitive development. Betty Hart and Todd Risley estimated in 1995 that children from families on welfare enter school with about half the vocabulary of children from professional families. This is due to the fact that among children six months to three years old, children from families receiving welfare assistance, on average, hear roughly 616 words per hour compared to 1,251 for children of working-class parents and 2,153 for children raised by parents who are professionals.¹³² Furthermore, we know that variation in children's initial preparation for learning is

¹²⁸ Reardon, "No Rich Child Left Behind."

¹²⁹ Rothstein, *Class and Schools*, 21-22.

¹³⁰ Rothstein, *Class and Schools*, 21, 154n. Such practices found among middle-class families are what Annette Lareau refers to as "concerted cultivation." See: Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 238-241.

¹³¹ Rothstein, *Class and Schools*, 21, 154n; Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, 238-241.

¹³² Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Baltimore: P.H. Brookes, 1995).

not randomly distributed across America's schools. Rather, even on the first day of kindergarten, achievement levels vary substantially from one school to another.¹³³

As the work of sociologist Annette Lareau illustrates, social class is reproduced from the workplace into the structure of the family. Parents whose professional occupations entail authority and responsibility typically believe that they can affect their own environments and solve problems. They encourage their daughters and sons to do the same, and so while middle class children argue with their siblings and parents, and develop their own opinions, such behavior is less tolerated in working-class and poor families, either black or white.¹³⁴ Parents whose working-class jobs usually entail following orders are, according to Lareau's ethnographic study, more likely to instruct their children by giving directions without extended discussion.¹³⁵

In addition to the reproduction of reading abilities and habits of inquiry through the family structure, the health of children is also crucially affected by their class position. Lower-class children have poorer oral hygiene than do children from middle-class families and experience significantly higher rates of lead poisoning, asthma, exposure to smoke, and poor nutrition.¹³⁶ On average, lower-income children have poorer vision, in part due to prenatal conditions and in part due to watching more television and spending more time playing video games than more affluent

¹³³ Douglas B. Downey, Paul T. von Hippel, and Beckett A. Broh, "Are Schools the Great Equalizer? Cognitive Inequality During the Summer Months and the School Year," *American Sociological Review*, 69:5 (2004), 613-635.

¹³⁴ Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, 241.

¹³⁵ Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, 244.

¹³⁶ Richard Rothstein, "A Look at the Health-related Causes of Low Student Achievement," *Economic Policy Institute*, March 1, 2011, accessed May 16, 2014, http://www.epi.org/publication/a_look_at_the_health-related_causes_of_low_student_achievement/.

children.¹³⁷ The normal rate of vision problems in children is about 25 percent, yet researchers have repeatedly noted incidences of more than 50 percent in disadvantaged communities.¹³⁸ Because of less adequate dental care, disadvantaged children are more likely to have toothaches and resulting discomfort that affects concentration.¹³⁹ Higher rates of asthma lead to more absences from school; when asthmatic children do attend school, they are vulnerable to drowsiness due to their often lying awake at night, wheezing.¹⁴⁰ Finally, lower-class children receive less frequent and adequate pediatric care. This is in part due to a lack of access to quality health care, but also because there are fewer primary-care physicians in low-income communities, where the physician-to-population ratio is less than a third the rate in middle-class communities.¹⁴¹ Given these realities, it is likely poor children miss school for relatively minor health problems, such as common ear infections, for which most middle-class and upper-class children are treated promptly. On average, poor children miss 30 percent more school days than do middle class students.¹⁴²

Finally, the growing cost of housing for low-income families also affects children's early educational achievement. Children whose families have difficulty finding stable housing are more likely to move from school to school, and student

¹³⁷ Rothstein, "A Look at the Health-related Causes of Low Student Achievement." Rothstein notes: "In the United States, 50 percent of poor children have vision impairment that interferes with academic work, twice the normal rate."

¹³⁸ Rothstein, "A Look at the Health-related Causes of Low Student Achievement." Richard Rothstein cites research showing that poor children's eyes may wander or have difficulty tracking print or focusing. See: Paul Harris, "Learning-Related Visual Problems in Baltimore City: A Long Term Program," *Journal of Optometric Vision Development* 33:3 (2002), 75-115.

¹³⁹ Rothstein, "A Look at the Health-related Causes of Low Student Achievement." Children covered by Medicaid are almost twice as likely to have untreated dental decay as children with private insurance.

¹⁴⁰ Rothstein, *Class and Schools*, 40-41.

¹⁴¹ Rothstein. "A Look at the Health-related Causes of Low Student Achievement."

¹⁴² Rothstein, *Class and Schools*, 42.

mobility is an important cause of failing student performance, as switching schools can often be a disorienting experience for a child.¹⁴³ It is hard to imagine how teachers, no matter how well trained, can be as effective for children who move in and out of their classrooms as they can be for those who attend regularly.

Differences in wealth are also likely to be important determinants of achievement, but these are usually overlooked because most analysts focus only on annual family income to indicate disadvantage. The wealth difference may be part of the reason why black students, on average, score lower than whites whose family incomes are the same. It is easier to understand this pattern when we recognize that children can have similar family incomes but be of different economic classes. The average middle-class white family has considerably more wealth than the average middle class African-American family (some studies estimate the gap as ten-fold) because the white family is likely to be descended from several generations of middle-class families, while African-American middle class families are often first or, at most, second-generation members of the middle class.¹⁴⁴ Wealth speaks to the level of stability a given family can maintain when and if they experience economic difficulties. Wealth, more so than income, also determines where families reside. Amy Orr took the concept of wealth (assets minus debts) and measured its impact on student achievement. Orr concluded that “wealth has a positive effect on

¹⁴³ Rothstein, *Class and Schools*, 46-47.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Shapiro, Tatjana Meschede, and Sam Osoro, *The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap: Explaining the Black-White Economic Divide* (Washington, D.C.: Institute on Assets and Social Policy, 2013).

achievement, even after family's SES is held constant. Wealth also explains a portion of black-white differences in achievement."¹⁴⁵

Obviously these are all statistical generalizations; many low-income children are read to at home and have good health; but lower income children are on average less likely to experience these conditions than are children of middle-class parents. All of these factors contribute to the reality that lower-class students do not perform as well as their advantaged peers in school, particularly in the elementary years that largely determine one's secondary school preparation and performance. When reformers speak of "No Excuses" charter schools, are they saying that none of the aforementioned inequalities will influence the school performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend charter schools?

IV. Education Reform's Focus On Urban Black Youth: A Macro Understanding of Concentrated Poverty in America's Cities

Education reformers argue that we must ensure that low-income children (often referring, at least implicitly to black, urban children) achieve comparable skills in school to those acquired by affluent children. We will do so, education reformers argue, by a range of reforms to our urban schools and by restrictions imposed on the power of urban teachers' unions. But the education reformers' promotion of "choice," charters, and merit pay for teachers fail to recognize that a major obstacle to the success of their own proposals may lie in persistent school and neighborhood racial and class segregation.

The black-white achievement gap persists even when social scientists control for socio-economic status of students.¹⁴⁶ Given that black students score lower on

¹⁴⁵ Amy J. Orr, "Black-White Differences in Achievement: The Importance of Wealth," *Sociology of Education*, 76:4 (2003), 295.

achievements tests in math and reading even when compared with their peers of equivalent socio-economic status, it is understandable that education reform has utilized the image of failing urban, predominantly minority schools to rally public support for their agenda. But where “equity” school reformers of the past pushed for desegregation and class-and-racial integration of school children, “accountability” education reformers focus solely on “turning around” these “failing,” largely black and Latino schools. Segregation over the past forty years has lessened, mostly due to the break up of highly segregated communities in the South. But decreases in segregation were not as significant in the nation as a whole; the percentage of Blacks enrolled in 50–100% minority schools was at 76.6% in 1967–68, dropping to 63.3% in 1986–87, and rising again to 70.2% in 1998–99.¹⁴⁷ Additionally the percentage of Blacks enrolled in 90–100% minority schools was at 64.4% in 1967–68, declining to a low of 32.2% in 1986–87, and rising to 36.6% in 1998–99.¹⁴⁸

While it is not hard to understand why lower income children enter the formal educational system already behind in education-related skills than their more affluent peers, the reasons behind the black-white achievement gap are more complex in nature. It is particularly distressing that blacks fall behind whites in educational

¹⁴⁶ Marianne Perie and Rebecca Moran, “NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance in Reading and Mathematics,” U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2004). The decline in the black-white achievement gap, however modest, occurred largely during the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1990s, the black-white gap actually increased and then dropped slightly at the close of the century. As of 2004, the black-white achievement gaps for 17-year-olds in math and reading and 13-year-olds in reading were larger than in 1990. The black-white gap in NAEP reading scores for 13-year-olds was 39 points in 1971; it declined to an 18 point difference in 1988 and then rose to a 22 point difference in 2004. The black-white gap in NAEP math scores for 13-year-olds followed a similar pattern, with a gap of 46 points in 1971 that declined to a 27 point difference in 1990, rose to 32 in 1999, and then returned to a 27 point difference in 2004.

¹⁴⁷ Orfield and Gordon, *Schools More Separate*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Orfield and Gordon. *Schools More Separate*, 31.

achievement *after* entering school. That is, when we control for socio-economic status, blacks and whites enter school with similar levels of achievement.¹⁴⁹ But once students enter school, the gap between white and black children grows, even after controlling for observable influences of social class. In fact, from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of first grade, black students lose 20 percent of a standard deviation relative to white students with similar characteristics.¹⁵⁰

Academics and policy experts have devoted much time and effort to studying the black-white achievement gap, but missing from our political discourse is a recognition that this gap is at least in part a result of the fact that black students, regardless of their family's socio-economic status, are more likely than whites and than other minorities to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.¹⁵¹ In 2004 economists Roland G. Fryer, Jr. and Steven D. Levitt published a widely-cited article "Understanding the Black-White Achievement Gap in the First Two Years of School." Fryer and Levitt held that "school quality" was the only variable in their data that received empirical support in causing the black-white achievement gap, noting that black children who attend the same schools as whites lose only a third as much ground as they do relative to whites in the overall sample. However, even though the measure of "school quality" is "the only hypothesis that receives any empirical support," they note that it is still is not definitive proof of the argument that differences in the quality of schools attended by white and black children explain the

¹⁴⁹ Roland G. Fryer and Steven D. Levitt, "Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap in the First Two Years of School," *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86:2 (2004), 447-464.

¹⁵⁰ Fryer and Levitt, "Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap," 447-464.

¹⁵¹ "Data Snapshot on High-poverty Communities," (Baltimore: Kids Count, 2012) accessed April 4, 2014, http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/D/DataSnapshotonHighPovertyCommunities/KIDSCOUNTDataSnapshot_HighPovertyCommunities.pdf.

difference in educational outcomes: “the available measures of schools’ characteristics as a group explain only a small fraction of the variation in student outcomes,” they admit.¹⁵² More interesting, Fryer and Levitt argue that it is not only difficult to measure school quality, but also that blacks and whites, when looking at “traditional measures of school quality” did not seem to attend radically different schools. It is worth quoting them at length:

The leading explanation for the worse trajectory of black students in our sample is that they attend lower-quality schools... This result suggests that differences in quality across schools attended by whites and blacks is likely to be an important part of the story. Interestingly, along traditionally considered dimensions of school quality (class size, teacher education, computer: student ratio, and so on), blacks and whites attend schools that are similar. On a wide range of nonstandard school inputs (including gang problems in school, percentage of students on free lunch, amount of loitering in front of school by nonstudents, amount of litter around the school, whether or not students need hall passes, and PTA funding), blacks do appear to be attending much worse schools even after controlling for individual characteristics.¹⁵³

Here Fryer and Levitt have conceptually brought neighborhood quality – and the existence of concentrated poverty – into their definition of “school quality.”

Should we permit Fryer and Levitt to define “the percentage of students eligible for free lunch, the degree of gang problems in school, the amount of loitering in front of the school by non-students, and the amount of litter around the schools” as “non-traditional” school inputs?¹⁵⁴ Might we not more accurately characterize these as neighborhood and social characteristics of impoverished urban neighborhoods with which our schools must deal? Fryer and Levitt are after all, aware of the fact that their data can be read to justify “the argument that systematic differences in the schools

¹⁵²Roland G. Fryer and Steven D. Levitt, “Falling Behind: New Evidence on the Black-white Achievement Gap,” *Education Next* 4:4 (October 2004), accessed May 16, 2014, <http://educationnext.org/fallingbehind/>.

¹⁵³Fryer and Levitt, “Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap,” 447-464.

¹⁵⁴Fryer and Levitt, “Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap,” 448.

attended by white and black children may explain the divergence in test scores.”¹⁵⁵

But the larger point that Fryer and Levitt appear to make—though they do not explicitly state it—is that children who grow up in neighborhoods characterized by intense poverty and mass unemployment grow up in conditions that inhibit, on average, their educational performance. This is not just due to poverty’s effects on the family, but also the ways in which the social conditions of impoverished neighborhoods affect life both outside and inside schools. By understanding the presence of gangs, loitering, and litter as “non-traditional school factors,” Fryer and Levitt have brought the neighborhood into the school. Are they not saying that the school environment itself may be affected by having a student body overwhelming composed of students from impoverished families?

When Fryer and Levitt write that black students “attend lower-quality schools that are less well maintained and managed as indicated by signs of social discord,” their idea of “social discord” may well be a surrogate variable for the concentration of poverty characteristic of our urban centers. Their surrogate variable would thus speak to the reality that low-income African American children grow up in neighborhoods with much higher concentrated poverty than not only whites, but also Asian-Americans and even Latinos.¹⁵⁶ In addition, given that black middle-class families tend to have less wealth than white middle-class families, as well as the presence of factors such as housing discrimination, black middle-class families are more likely to

¹⁵⁵ Fryer and Levitt, “Falling Behind: New Evidence on the Black-white Achievement.”

¹⁵⁶ “Data Snapshot on High-poverty Communities.”

live in neighborhoods with low-income white neighbors than comparable middle-class white families.¹⁵⁷

Given the stress that education reformers put on our high-poverty, urban schools, it is worth noting some of the relevant data we have on how the concentration of poverty affects student outcomes. A 1996 study of 24,599 eighth-grade students found that, particularly for math and reading scores, the “SES of a school had an effect on achievement that was comparable to the effects associated with the SES of a family.”¹⁵⁸ A study of low-income students in Montgomery County, Maryland finds evidence that low-income students perform better on math tests after moving to low-poverty schools.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, a recent study of peer effects finds evidence that the academic achievement level of one’s classmates may impact one’s own achievement.¹⁶⁰ A 1999 study of approximately 60,000 students in four Minnesota school districts concluded that “the degree to which poor children are surrounded by other poor children, both in their neighborhood and at school, has as strong an effect on their achievement as their own poverty.”¹⁶¹ Just as the peer-effect can have positive effects, it can have negative ones as well. Studies have found that students in high-poverty neighborhoods and schools are far more likely to drop out of

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin Lady, “How Income Segregation Broke the Middle Class,” *The Century Foundation*, October 31, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://tcf.org/blog/detail/how-income-segregation-broke-the-middle-class>.

¹⁵⁸ Esther Ho Sui-Chu and Douglas J. Willms, “Effects of Parental Involvement on Eighth-Grade Achievement,” *Sociology of Education*, 69:2 (April 1996), 130, 135, 138.

¹⁵⁹ Heather Schwartz, *Housing Policy Is School Policy: Economically Integrative Housing Promotes Academic Success in Montgomery County, Maryland* (Washington, D.C.: The Century Foundation, 2010).

¹⁶⁰ Victor Lavy, Olmo Silma, and Felix Weinhardt, “The Good, the Bad, and the Average: Evidence on the Scale and Nature of Peer Effects in Schools.” NBER Working Paper 15600 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009).

¹⁶¹ Stephen Schellenberg, “Concentration of Poverty and the Ongoing Need for Title I,” in *Hard Work for Good Schools: Facts not Fads in Title I Reform*, eds. Gary Orfield and Elizabeth DeBray (Cambridge: Harvard Civil Rights Project, 1999), 130.

school than are poor students who live in economically mixed neighborhoods.¹⁶² The absence of class-based neighborhood and school integration in the United States may be important in explaining both the racial and class-based achievement gap.

The large number of schools whose student body comes disproportionately from impoverished families plays a major role in the crisis of the American school system. An October 2013 study from the Southern Education Foundation found increasing rates of concentrated poverty and deprivation: “The nation’s cities have the highest rates of low income students in public schools. Sixty percent of the public school children in America’s cities were in low-income households in 2011. In 38 of the 50 states, no less than half of all children attending public schools in cities... were low income.”¹⁶³ According to the report, low-income children make up 83 percent of all children in Mississippi’s cities, 78 percent in New Jersey’s cities, 75 percent in Pennsylvania’s cities, and 73 percent in New York’s cities.¹⁶⁴ Thomas Timar has noted that such concentrations of poverty are particularly harmful to education:

While manifestations of the achievement gap are to be found in rural, suburban, and urban areas, the evidence is rather compelling that the achievement gap is largely a problem of urban education... Black children are more likely to live in conditions of concentrated poverty... Child poverty rose in nearly every city from 1970-1990... [and] urban students are more than twice as likely to attend high-poverty schools... In 1990, the child

¹⁶² John Powel, “Segregation and Educational Inadequacy in Twin Cities Public Schools,” *Hamline Journal of Public Law and Policy*, 17, (Spring 1996), 345; Maureen T. Hallinhan, “Commentary: New Directions for Research in Peer Influence,” in *Friends in School: Patterns of Selection and Influence in Secondary Schools*, ed. Joyce Levy Epstein and Nancy Karwest (New York: Academic Press, 1983), 222.

¹⁶³ Steve Suitts, “Research Report Update: A New Majority Low Income Students in the South and Nation,” Southern Education Foundation, October 2013, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/0bc70ce1-d375-4ff6-8340-f9b3452ee088/A-New-Majority-Low-Income-Students-in-the-South-an.aspx>.

¹⁶⁴ Suitts, “Research Report Update: A New Majority Low Income Students in the South and Nation.”

poverty rate for the United States as a whole was 18 percent. For the ten worst cities it was between 40 and 58 percent.”¹⁶⁵

A 2008 study by sociologists Robert Sampson, Patrick Sharkey, and Steven Raudenbush concluded that growing up in a neighborhood of concentrated disadvantage has the same effect on a five-year-old’s verbal ability as missing an entire year of school. Interestingly, their findings compared the consequences of being raised in Chicago's best-off and worst-off African-American neighborhoods; they made no comparison with predominantly white neighborhoods, since no white neighborhood was remotely comparable to the worst-off parts of the city’s South Side.¹⁶⁶

V. Who Is Failing What?

Given the racial and class stratification of America it is overly simplistic to term our urban schools as “failing” their students. Crucially, the way we have conceptualized evaluation of schools in No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top is inherently biased against schools serving disadvantaged schools. Educational sociologist Douglas Downey has argued that No Child Left Behind blames schools for “non-school factors”—factors that are out of a school’s control such as what happens to students’ skills over the lengthy summer break from school.¹⁶⁷

No Child Left Behind evaluates schools based on whether or not they are bringing children up to “proficiency.” Under No Child Left Behind schools and

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Timar, *Narrowing the Achievement Gap* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2012), 232.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Sampson, Patrick Sharkey, and Steven Raudenbush, “Durable Effects of Concentrated Disadvantage on Verbal Ability Among Africa-American Children,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 105:3 (2008), 845-52.

¹⁶⁷ Douglas B. Downey, Paul T. von Hippel, and Melanie Hughes, “Are ‘Failing’ Schools Really Failing? Using Seasonal Comparison to Evaluate School Effectiveness,” *Sociology of Education* 81:3 (July 2008), 242-270.

districts were required to show “adequate yearly progress” toward their statewide objectives—that is, they must demonstrate (through their test scores) that they are on course to reach one hundred percent proficiency for all socio-economic groups of students within twelve years. The states themselves determine student proficiency level, as well as adequate rates of progress for each group. But such measures of “proficiency” (unless states make such standards artificially low) ignore the fact that students enter schools with great inequalities in educational readiness.

Downey’s findings show that many “failing” schools actually succeed in increasing students’ basic academic skills significantly from September to June. But those skills deteriorate over the summer much more for poor students than they do for students from more affluent families. When schools are evaluated with respect to achievement on test scores from June to June, schools serving disadvantaged students are disproportionately likely to be labeled as “failing.” Yet only 25 percent of schools failing in terms of their June-June “achievement” scores were failing when graded by Downey on their September-June “impact.” Furthermore Downey finds that the correlation between school “impact” (September-June test comparisons) and the location of the school or the class or racial composition of the student body is less strong than it appears when we use No Child Left Behind June-June measurements of schools’ success.

The pattern Downey outlines suggests that No Child Left Behind discriminates against schools serving disadvantaged students (who enter school already behind their middle-class peers), and that many of our schools deemed “failing” actually have at least considerable positive “impact” on their students’

learning rates. Given this reality, these students are not being failed by the schools, but rather by the social circumstances in which they are raised, and the lack of public policy efforts to provide urban renewal, anti-poverty programs, comprehensive pre-school, as well as enriching after-school and summer programs.

Race to the Top has attempted to avoid around some of the problems of No Child Left Behind by implementing “value-added” measurements of teacher performance. As Jim Horn and Denise Wilburn, authors of *The Mismeasure of Education*, write:

Value-added assessment uses sophisticated statistical manipulations of achievement test scores that allow states to get credit for children making their expected growth based on past academic performance even if they did not achieve grade level proficiency. For example, if a fourth-grade child operating at a second-grade reading level made nine months of academic growth in reading, but did not reach the fourth grade reading achievement benchmark, value-added assessment still credits the teacher, school and district with making adequate progress with this child.¹⁶⁸

But this may not be the silver-bullet, either; many critics continue to worry that these value-added measurements cannot separate teachers’ impact from other factors, and that schools that cater to low-income students will continue to be punished for their inability to overcome “out of school factors.”¹⁶⁹ Value-added measurements remain

¹⁶⁸ Jim Horn and Denise Wilburn, “Case Study: The False Promise of Value-Added Teacher Assessment,” *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2013, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/10/04/case-study-the-false-promise-of-value-added-teacher-assessment/>.

¹⁶⁹ Elaine Weiss, *Mismatches in Race to the Top Limit Educational Improvement: Lack of Time, Resources, and Tools to Address Opportunity Gaps Puts Lofty State Goals Out of Reach* (Washington, D.C.: Bolder, Broader Approach to Education, 2013), 5; Sean P. Corcoran, *Can Teachers Be Evaluated By Their Students’ Test Scores? Should They Be? The Use of Value-Added Measures of Teacher Effectiveness in Policy and Practice* (Providence: Annenberg Institute, 2010), accessed April 6, 2014, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522163.pdf>.

imperfect and still fail to account for the “summer setback” that poor students experience.¹⁷⁰

Americans have unrealistic views about what schools can do to overcome the effects that poverty has on both student and school performance. So much so that education reform advocates fail to recognize that many of our inner city schools are already working overtime to improve students’ educational performance. We should remember that the effect of schools during their nine-month period of instruction actually lessens the achievement gap between affluent and lower income students. Yet schools cannot do enough in nine months to overcome the inequalities that they inherit at the start of a child’s educational experience and that are exacerbated over the summer months.

VI. Going Beyond Internal School Reform: Social Policy Aimed At Equal Opportunity

The research outlined in this chapter strongly suggests that social class, poverty, and neighborhood composition affect educational performance and that lower income children perform best when in integrated schools with a large proportion of middle-income students. Yet the reformers do not promote the integration of schools and neighborhoods by race and class. Nor do reformers discuss the need for expanding anti-poverty programs, and financing such programs through progressive taxation on income and wealth, coupled with cuts to the defense budget.

¹⁷⁰ Cassandra M. Guarino, Mark D. Reckase, and Jeffrey M. Wooldridge, “Can Value-Added Measures of Teacher Education Performance Be Trusted?” The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University Working Paper No. 18, December 12, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, http://education.msu.edu/epc/publications/documents/WP18Guarino-Reckase-Wooldridge-2012-Can-Value-Added-Measures-of-Teacher-Performance-Be-T_000.pdf.

A serious reform effort aimed at achieving equality of opportunity in schools across the divide of race and class is best viewed as a two-pronged process: the politically costly (perhaps infeasible) effort to integrate schools by socio-economic status; and the economically costly effort to “scale-up” projects such as Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children Zone, which provides children and families living within a certain area of Central Harlem comprehensive social and health services through a cradle-to-college-or-career pipeline. Canada’s Children’s Zone has the resources to offer amazing facilities and services to those who enroll in its charter schools. In October 2010, according to an article in *The New York Times*, the Harlem Children Zone had \$200 million in the bank, and some billionaires on the board, so the school can afford to help children in ways that public schools cannot.¹⁷¹ Scaling up such projects to meet the needs of students living in poor neighborhoods across the nation would entail a massive increase in federal, state and local funding on education.

To the extent that integration is off the immediate political agenda, education reformers could still focus their efforts on creating “round-the-year and round-the-clock” schools as community centers that would create for lower income children the extra-curricular experiences that enhance the learning potential of middle class children. Such schools could provide much of the educational and cultural capital that youth from disadvantaged communities often do not receive at home, as well as the social services and health care services denied poor and working class children. Certainly, improvement of teacher quality in our worst schools and curriculum redesign are desirable reforms, but a focus on internal school reform alone is

¹⁷¹ Sharon Otterman, “Lauded Harlem Schools Have Their Own Problems,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2010, accessed April 6, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/education/13harlem.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

insufficient. To create equality of opportunity, school improvement efforts must be combined with policies focused on early childhood, after-school, and summer experiences, when the disparate class influences of families and communities are most powerful. Without such enriching pre-school, after school, and summer programs, holding schools accountable for not bringing their students up to proficiency is an ill-informed, if not hypocritical demand.

The most effective public educational investment that could help to redress the gap in educational readiness that exists on lines of race and class would be in high-quality early childhood programs, particularly in low-income communities.¹⁷² The quality of early childhood programs is as important as the existence of such programs themselves. After-school and summer experiences for lower-class children, similar in quality to the programs middle-class children usually experience, would also be needed to narrow the achievement gap. The advantage that middle-class children gain after school and in summer comes from the social skills and self-confidence they acquire from organized group activities. Through summer enrichment programs, affluent students gain an awareness of the world outside their immediate communities through organized athletics, dance, drama, museum visits, and recreational reading. All these “extra-curricular” activities develop inquisitiveness, creativity, self-discipline, and organizational skills in the students who participate in them.

¹⁷² Julia B. Isaacs, *Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012), accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/3/19%20school%20disadvantage%20isaacs/0319_school_disadvantage_isaacs.

Reformers have to admit that scaling up such projects would entail a major commitment of federal, state and local financial resources. Thus far, socially conscious reformers like Geoffrey Canada have not called for public funding of “schools as community centers” on a national scale. Canada correctly claims that the Harlem Children Zone model, while not cheap, is worth the investment given what we spend on incarcerating youth and what we would gain from these children becoming full-time workers. But, curiously, rather than speaking openly about how much his project will cost if scaled to a national level, and what we need to do in regards to tax and budgetary policy in order to finance it, Canada has been a proponent of “trimming entitlements” such as Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare, and has not called for raising taxes on corporations and the affluent. In 2013 he co-authored an opinion piece in *Wall Street Journal*, along with Stanley Druckenmiller and Kevin Warsh:

One of us is a Democrat; one, an independent; another, a Republican. Yet, together, we recognize several hard truths: Government spending levels are unsustainable. Higher taxes, however advisable or not, fail to come close to solving the problem. Discretionary spending must be reduced but without harming the safety net for our most vulnerable, or sacrificing future growth (e.g., research and education). Defense and homeland security spending should not be immune to reductions. Most consequentially, the growth in spending on entitlement programs—Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare—must be curbed. . . . Coming out of the most recent elections, no consensus emerged either to reform the welfare state or to pay for it. And too many politicians appear unwilling to level with Americans about the challenges and choices confronting the United States. The failure to be forthright on fiscal policy is doing grievous harm to the country's long-term growth prospects. And the greatest casualties will be young Americans of all stripes who want—and need—an opportunity to succeed.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Geoffrey Canada, Stanley Druckenmiller, and Kevin Warsh, “Generational Theft Needs to Be Arrested,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323485704578257753243530078>.

The notion that raising taxes on the rich and cuts to defense would not make a dent in our accumulated federal debt is representative of the broader bipartisan consensus that we do not have the money to solve all of society's social ills. The Congressional Progressive Caucus's (CPC) fiscal year 2013 proposal entitled the "Budget For All" proves this wrong. The CPC's budget creates a fair tax code, ends spending on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and cuts other wasteful defense spending; it preserves funding for anti-poverty programs and engages in approximately \$300 billion in annual investments in alternative energy, education, infrastructure and transportation. On top of that, it achieves a \$6.8 trillion in deficit reduction and attains the same debt-to-GDP ratio as the Republican budget.¹⁷⁴

By contrast, proposing to make Social Security a means-tested program and raising eligibility would undercut the universality of Social Security and lead more affluent taxpayers to resent paying dedicated taxes for rather meager benefits, which could leave the program vulnerable to even further cuts in the future. Obviously this is not Canada's intention, but given the narrow focus of the education reform movement, it is not surprising that Canada has not proven willing to demand that the super-rich and corporations pay their fair share in taxes to fund quality public services. To do so, Canada would have to break ranks with the same members of "the one percent" that makes up his donor base. Such a transformation of tax and budgetary priorities are imperative if both seniors and children are to benefit from robust public financing of the social rights to both old age income assistance and well-funded pre-school and K-12 public education.

¹⁷⁴ "Budget For All: Budget of the Congressional Progressive Caucus Fiscal Year 2013," Congressional Progressive Caucus, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://cpc.grijalva.house.gov/budget-for-all/>.

Of course, Canada must be understood as a strategic political actor looking for money to fund his particular cause. While his political position may be more astute than that of the “No Excuses” breed of education reformers (Canada openly calls for alleviating child poverty), tackling poverty and inequality will ultimately require a more equitable distribution of wealth and power. To make such a vision reality we will need to build a politics that goes beyond Canada’s calls for fiscal belt-tightening. This will be discussed more in Chapter Four as we examine the relationship between inequality and equality of opportunity.

Ultimately, schooling alone, absent efforts both to lessen socio-economic inequality and to invest resources in schools as “round the clock” community centers, is likely to reproduce in students (on average) the social and educational capital of their parents. Yet despite this evidence, we have become obsessed with those relatively rare inner city schools, particularly successful charter schools, and teaching techniques that purportedly “beat” the demographic odds. Charter schools, on average, do not outperform traditional urban public schools and the allegedly most successful charters too often “cream” students, by indirectly selecting students with more involved parents (because parents have to make a conscious effort to get their child into a “good” charter school and have to sign pledges to help their children with work).¹⁷⁵ In addition, the average urban teacher either leaves the district or the profession after less than five years of service. Thus, professionalizing teaching and

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin Wood, “Study: Majority of U.S. Charter Schools Perform Equal or Worse Than Traditional Schools” *Deseret News*, June 24, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865582169/Study-Majority-of-US-charter-schools-perform-equal-or-worse-than-traditional-schools.html?pg=all#GZ1bmaXiw0eOLlmH.01>; Stephanie Simon, “Special Report: Class Struggle – How Charter Schools Get Students They Want,” *Reuters*, February 15, 2013, accessed April 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/16/us-usa-charters-admissions-idUSBRE91E0HF20130216>.

enhancing its social status and remuneration would do more to enhance teacher performance than would hiring overworked, underpaid, inexperienced charter teachers.¹⁷⁶

Education reform efforts that fail to address poverty, as well as the persistent socio-economic and racial segregation of American society, will likely result in insubstantial and tenuous gains in low-income student performance. This is not to argue that all achievement inequalities are direct reflections of the socio-economic status of children and that we do not need to reform our public system of education. Obviously if we want schools to be arenas for enhanced social mobility, policy-makers will have to focus on providing our least advantaged students with the benefits of attending schools with the best, most experienced teachers and the best endowed educational resources. But the “magic bullet” education reforms of charterization and merit pay are currently displacing in public discourse the ever-more necessary—and yet largely absent—efforts to redress the systemic effects that poverty and inequality have on low-income student performance.

The notion that we can hold our schools accountable and responsible for the success of our least-advantaged members is a peculiarly American idea that (rather idealistically) views schools to be engines of upward mobility rather than (partially) reproducers of class inequality. Today, in cities like New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, we are beginning to witness the joint mobilization of teachers and inner city parents to demand not only greater funding of public schools, but also efforts to raise

¹⁷⁶ Motoko Rich, “At Charter Schools, Short Careers by Choice,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/education/at-charter-schools-short-careers-by-choice.html?pagewanted=all>.

wages and increase affordable urban housing. These nascent movements recognize that only through massive public investments can we ensure that, as education reformer Geoffrey Canada likes to put it, all poor kids receive the same social and cultural opportunities that their middle- and upper-middle class children experience. Given the influence of social class and out-of-school experience on educational performance, those who desire to achieve greater equality of opportunity in schooling must tackle the structural inequalities that students face outside of the school.

The inability to recognize the social responsibility to alleviate inequality and poverty itself stems, in part, from the myth that poverty and inequality are the result of low educational attainment and individual lack of effort. This line of thought will be examined in Chapter Three.

Chapter 3: The Cure-All: Education as the Solution to Inequality and Unemployment

I. Explaining Inequality and Unemployment Through Educational Attainment

In the previous chapter I offered an alternative understanding of poverty to that articulated by education reformers, and problematized their claim that internal school reforms can restore equality of opportunity. In this chapter, I challenge the claim, put forward by both politicians and education reform advocates, that increased inequality, low-wage work, unemployment, and underemployment result from a crisis in education. Education reformers such as Geoffrey Canada and Michelle Rhee prefer to present themselves as advocates for the poor, and tend to justify their proposals on the grounds that they promote equality of opportunity. But they also implicitly suggest that education reform can by itself raise wages, reduce inequality, and increase employment. Without education reform, they argue, disadvantaged children will be relegated to future poverty because they will not graduate from high school and they certainly will not graduate from college. According to this logic, absent improvements in education, students will not attain the skills necessary to succeed in the high-tech, knowledge-based, 21st-century economy. While this logic may be implicit in the speeches and interviews of education reformers, politicians employ the concept explicitly all the time as they propose education reform to combat inequality, unemployment, and underemployment. The academic theories that I will explicate in this chapter are erudite, but they are central to informing the ideological consensus that education is the key to promoting not only a better life for individuals, but a better, more equal, and globally competitive United States.

Many education reform advocates claim that the rise in inequality over the past 40 years has been caused by either technological change or technological change coupled with our societal failure to increase the number of students graduating from high school and completing college. They also contend that a gap between the skills that workers have and the skills that employers need (the “skills gap” or “skills mismatch”) has produced continued, structural unemployment. This chapter develops a three-part argument: 1) that the education reform movement relies heavily on “skill biased technological change” (SBTC) and the “skills gap” thesis; 2) that a consensus does not exist among scholars as to the validity of SBTC and the skills gap thesis; and 3) that even if the theories explain part of the increase in inequality and unemployment in recent decades, they fail to capture other important causes. These education-driven explanations distract us from considering other programs necessary to reduce inequality and unemployment, and fail to consider the social wellbeing of those who do not complete college or who find themselves in “low-skilled” work. We must tackle the root causes of inequality, poverty, and the contemporary jobs crisis, and not allow the education discourse to distract us from doing so.

II. Nervous About A High Tech Future: The Call for Education Reform

Both politicians and reformers employ the notion of “skill-biased technological change” when articulating the urgent need for education reform. In 2007, President George W. Bush, in an address to the Wall Street financial community, acknowledged the reality of growing income inequality: “The fact is that income inequality is real – it’s been rising for more than 25 years... The reason is clear: We have an economy that increasingly rewards education and skills because of

that education.”¹⁷⁷ In the concluding paragraph of their 2012 “Manifesto” in the *Washington Post*, then New York and D.C. school chancellors Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee joined other prominent members of the educational reform community in arguing that, “Until we fix our schools, we will never fix the nation’s broader economic problems. Until we fix our schools, the gap between the haves and the have-nots will only grow wider and the United States will fall further behind the rest of the industrialized world in education, rendering the American dream a distant, elusive memory.”¹⁷⁸ In these quotes, politicians and reform advocates employ the familiar notion that an education is the way to climb the socio-economic ladder and that the difference between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is a matter of their educational attainment.

The Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” education initiative draws upon this ideology, which might be summarized as “educate and train our young and the good jobs will come.” President Obama has claimed that “In a 21st-century economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, education is the single best bet we can make – not just for our individual success, but for the success of the nation as a whole.”¹⁷⁹ Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education for President Obama, speaking at a conference, “From Classroom to Career: Investing in Tomorrow’s Workforce,” made clear that his department is central to any solutions to

¹⁷⁷ As cited in Michael Abramowitz and Lori Montgomery, “Bush Addresses Income Inequality,” *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2007, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/31/AR2007013100879.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Joel Klein, *et al.*, “How to Fix Our Schools: A Manifesto by Joel Klein, Michelle Rhee and Other Education Leaders,” *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2010, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/07/AR2010100705078.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Barack Obama, “Remarks By the President on Job Creation and Job Training” (speech, Washington D.C., May 8, 2009), The White House, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-Job-Creation-and-Job-Training-5/8/09/.

unemployment: “I’m more and more convinced that the skills crisis is a huge part of [unemployment]. I can’t tell you how many [companies] I’ve met with, and the President has met with, who have said, ‘We’re trying to hire right now, we’re not trying to export jobs and we can’t find the employees with the skills that we need’.”¹⁸⁰ A wide and bipartisan group of mainstream politicians employ such statements. “Businesses cannot find workers with the right skills,” says Democratic Senator Dick Durbin, and Republican Senator Rob Portman echoes: “Let’s close the skills gap and get Americans working again.” Tea Party darling Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) argues that the “fundamental obstacle to economic progress is the skills gap that exists in our nation. The fact of the matter is that millions of our people do not have the skills that they need for the 21st century.”¹⁸¹

These bipartisan politicians and education reformers believe that both rising inequality and jobless rates are due to the increasing rewards going to highly educated or highly skilled workers. To fully assess these political claims we must delve deeper into the theories of “skill biased technological change” and the “skills gap” thesis.

i. The “Race Between Education and Technology”

Skills-biased technological change gained near canonical status among mainstream economists during the late 1990s and early 2000s, culminating in widespread praise for Harvard professors Lawrence Katz and Claudia Goldin’s

¹⁸⁰ Arne Duncan, “From Classroom to Career: Investing in Tomorrow’s Workforce” (speech, New York, October 23, 2012), Roosevelt House, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/events/from-classroom-to-career/#videos>. For similar remarks from Duncan, see: David Rohde and Kristina Cooke, “The Unequal State of America: An Interview with U.S. Education Chief Arne Duncan,” *Reuters*, December 12, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/19/us-equality-massachusetts-duncan-idUSBRE8BI0M020121219>.

¹⁸¹ Alexis Levinson, “Rubio Champions Trade Schools, Online Courses, ‘Non-Traditional’ Learning,” *The Daily Caller*, January 1, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://dailycaller.com/2013/01/24/rubio-champions-trade-schools-online-courses-non-traditional-learning/#ixzz2vmIiYBoV>.

monograph *The Race Between Technology and Education*.¹⁸² David Autor, Lawrence Katz, and Melissa S. Kearney explain the concept as follows: “Skill-biased technological change refers to any introduction of a new technology, change in production methods, or change in the organization of work that increases the demand for more-skilled labor relative to less-skilled labor at fixed relative wages.”¹⁸³

Skills-biased technological change posits that because educational attainment has not advanced commensurately with the increasing demand for highly skilled jobs, relative returns to skilled labor have increased. This slowdown is empirically true: the percentage of Americans under 30 with college degrees has largely stagnated since 1975, whereas the rate of college graduation accelerated rapidly between 1945-1975. The average person born in 1945 received two more years of schooling than his parents, while the average person born in 1975 received only half a year more of schooling than his parents.¹⁸⁴ As journalist Timothy Noah pointed out in *Slate Magazine*:

Throughout the first three-quarters of the 20th century a growing supply of better-educated workers met the demand created by new technologies... With the passing of each decade, the average 24-year-old had close to one additional year of schooling. These gains virtually halted starting with 1976’s cohort of 24-year-olds. Educational attainment started growing again in the 1990s, but at a much slower rate.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010). See also: Lawrence F. Katz and Kevin M. Murphy, “Changes in Relative Wages 1963-1987: Supply and Demand Factors,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 107:1 (1992), 35–78; David Autor, Lawrence F. Katz, and Alan Krueger, “Computing Inequality: Have Computers Changed the Labor Market?” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 113:4 (1998), 1169–1214.

¹⁸³ David Autor, Lawrence F. Katz, and Melissa Kearney, “Trends in US Wage Inequality: Re-Assessing the Revisionists,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 90:2 (2008), 310.

¹⁸⁴ Timothy Noah, “The United States of Inequality,” *Slate Magazine*, September 15, 2010, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_great_divergence/features/2010/the_united_states_of_inequality/how_the_decline_in_k12_education_enriches_college_graduates.html.

¹⁸⁵ Noah, “The United States of Inequality.”

Thus the obsession over sending more youth to college derives from an academic worry that earnings inequality is the result of an increasing “college premium” – one that we can counteract by increasing the college graduation rate among present and future generational cohorts.

In response to criticisms of this “canonical” model of SBTC, David Autor, Daron Acemoglu, David Dorn, and other economists began developing what has come to be known as the “job tasks” or the “polarization” thesis. As Lawrence Mishel, Heidi Shierholz, and John Schmitt wrote in an Economic Policy Institute (EPI) report: “a new technology-based explanation (formally called the “tasks framework”) focused on computerization’s impact on occupational employment trends and the resulting ‘job polarization’: the claim that occupational employment grew relatively strongly at the top and bottom of the wage scale but eroded in the middle”¹⁸⁶ Yet this seeming admission that the future economy would generate fewer “middle class” jobs did not alter the emphasis on schooling. Acemoglu and Autor conclude their article on the new job polarization framework with a plea for more education:

The United States must strive to improve the efficacy and efficiency of K–12 and pre-K education to provide the bulk of the workforce the skills needed to prosper in a rapidly changing environment. Whether or not this is essential for economic growth, it is indispensable for ensuring a more equitable distribution of (pretax) incomes and, arguably, a well-functioning democracy.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Lawrence Mishel, Heidi Shierholz, and John Schmitt, “Don’t Blame the Robots: Assessing the Job Polarization Explanation of Growing Wage Inequality,” *Economic Policy Institute*, November 19, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/technology-inequality-dont-blame-the-robots/>.

¹⁸⁷ Daron Acemoglu and David Autor, “What Does Human Capital Do? A Review of Goldin and Katz’s *The Race Between Education and Technology*,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50:2 (2012), 426–463.

David Autor made a similar call in his 2010 report for the liberal think tank The Center for American Progress: “Rising demand for highly educated workers, combined with lagging supply, is contributing to higher levels of earnings inequality.” He then opines that:

Encouraging more young adults to obtain higher education would have multiple benefits. Many jobs are being created that demand college-educated workers, so this will boost incomes. Additionally, an increased supply of college graduates should eventually help to drive down the college wage premium and limit the rise in inequality... The United States should foster improvements in K-12 education so that more people will be prepared to go on to higher education. Indeed, one potential explanation for the lagging college attainment of males is that K-12 education is not adequately preparing enough men to see that as a realistic option.¹⁸⁸

Thus both SBTC and “jobs polarization” analyses prescribe more and better education.

In a *New York Times* piece describing their most recent work, David Autor and David Dorn do temper their emphasis on education:

[Education] is far from a comprehensive solution to our labor market problems. Not all high school graduates — let alone displaced mid- and late-career workers — are academically or temperamentally prepared to pursue a four-year college degree. Only 40 percent of Americans enroll in a four-year college after graduating from high school, and more than 30 percent of those who enroll do not complete the degree within eight years.¹⁸⁹

They do not offer any other comprehensive solutions to inequality besides attempting to train more workers to fit the “middle-education, middle-wage jobs [that] are not slated to disappear completely,” jobs that “will combine routine technical tasks with

¹⁸⁸ David Autor, *The Future of American Jobs: The Polarization of Job Opportunities in the U.S. Labor Market* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2010), accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/report/2010/04/30/7687/the-future-of-american-jobs>, 29.

¹⁸⁹ David H. Autor and David Dorn, “How Technology Wrecks the Middle Class,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/how-technology-wrecks-the-middle-class/>.

abstract and manual tasks in which workers have a comparative advantage — interpersonal interaction, adaptability and problem-solving.”¹⁹⁰ While they claim that we need to train individuals to fit those middle-skill jobs that remain, they ultimately seem to suggest that technology will alter the labor market and that education cannot win the race (due to the fact that some individuals “are [not] academically or temperamentally prepared to pursue a four-year college degree”). Autor and Dorn’s position here joins them with conservative economist Tyler Cowen, whose book *Average Is Over* argues that technological change has brought on a new “hyper-meritocracy” in which those top 10-15 percent who couple their skills with technological change will win in increasingly grandiose fashion, while the rest of society loses.¹⁹¹

These economists seem to believe one of two things: 1) that inequality is a byproduct of education not keeping up with technology and thus can be combated by proper reform to our educational system; or 2) that technology has eliminated so many good, middle-class jobs that increased inequality is inevitable. David Autor articulated the latter position in an interview with Dylan Matthews of the *Washington Post*, arguing that Lawrence Mishel’s criticism of Autor’s work had a political impetus: “People in that group hate technical change as an explanation of anything. My opinion about why they hate it that much is that it’s not amenable to policy. All these other things you can say, Congress can change this or that. You can’t say

¹⁹⁰ Autor and Dorn, “How Technology Wrecks the Middle Class.”

¹⁹¹ Tyler Cowen, *Average Is Over: Powering America Beyond the Age of the Great Stagnation* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

Congress could reshape the trajectory of technological change.”¹⁹² By the logic of this second position, some education may help alleviate inequality, but inequality is largely here to stay. In both analyses, any consideration of other policies to lessen inequality is entirely missing.

ii. Education and Un(der)employment: The Skills Gap Thesis

Many economists, politicians, and reformers will refer to a “skills mismatch” or a “skills gap,” which is analytically different from skill-biased technological change but also leads to prescriptive calls for better education and training. The skills gap refers to the situation in which employers cannot find employees with the right set of skills or education, leading to “structural” unemployment. As Arne Duncan noted in an October 2012 speech:

With more than 3 million unfilled jobs in this country, [Americans] understand that we have a skills gap that can only be closed if America does a better job training and preparing people for work. Whether it is a two- or four-year college, trade, technical or vocational training – some form of learning beyond high school must be the goal of every student.¹⁹³

This explanation for unemployment has been prevalent in the mass media throughout the Great Recession but was also used on-and-off throughout the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁹⁴

The notion is revived every so often when business groups release reports expressing their discontent that they cannot find the workers they desire.¹⁹⁵ The

¹⁹² Dylan Matthews, “Inequality is Rising. Should We Blame Robots or the Government? Or both?” *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/01/12/inequality-is-rising-should-we-blame-robots-or-the-government-or-both/>.

¹⁹³ Arne Duncan, “Moving Forward, Staying Focused” (speech, Washington D.C., October 2, 2012), U.S. Department of Education, accessed March 26, 2014, <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/moving-forward-staying-focused>.

¹⁹⁴ Marc Levine, “The Skills Gap and Unemployment in Wisconsin: Separating Fact from Fiction,” *Center for Economic Development*, February 2013, accessed March 26, 2014, http://www4.uwm.edu/ced/publications/skillsgap_2013-2.pdf, 11-12.

mainstream press commonly quotes business leaders as to why hiring continues to lag. Consider an April 2013 *Forbes* article, in which Dennis Yang, president and COO of Udemy cited a recent report: “Employers report frustration at not finding skilled workers; and, according to the Manpower Growth 2012 Talent Shortage Survey, 49 percent of employers struggle to fill jobs. Jobs wait to be filled – current job seekers just lack the right skills.”¹⁹⁶ Or in March 2011, General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt and American Express CEO Ken Chenault wrote on the op-ed pages of *The Wall Street Journal* that “There are more than two million open jobs in the U.S., in part because employers can't find workers with the advanced manufacturing skills they need.”¹⁹⁷

While there is a slight distinction between the skills gap thesis and SBTC, they often become mixed together in the explanation many center-right politicians give for the persistent problems of the U.S. labor market. The terms have somewhat different causal foci: generally when economists refer to SBTC they are attempting to explain rising income inequality or the disappearance of good, middle class jobs; the skills gap, on the other hand, manifests itself in policy discussions that seek to explain high unemployment as being primarily structural in nature. But their policy implications are incredibly similar. In his article on the skills gap in Wisconsin Marc Levine noted that “a central premise of skills gap arguments since the 1980s has been that technical requirements of ‘21st century jobs’ are outstripping qualifications of

¹⁹⁵ See, for instance: DeLoitte and the Manufacturing Institute, *Boiling Point? The Skills Gap in U.S. manufacturing* (September 2011), accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/~media/A07730B2A798437D98501E798C2E13AA.ashx>.

¹⁹⁶ Dennis Yang, “Can We Fix the Skills Gap?” *Forbes*, August 2, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/groupthink/2013/08/02/can-we-fix-the-skills-gap/>.

¹⁹⁷ Jeff Immelt and Ken Chenault, “How We're Meeting the Job Creation Challenge,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2011, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://on.wsj.com/1jo4evd>.

existing workforce, and this gap will widen considerably in the future.”¹⁹⁸ In this sense the skills gap thesis shares SBTC’s focus on a large number of workers being under-qualified for today’s labor market. Lawrence Mishel, head of the liberal-left Economic Policy Institute, whose research challenges both the SBTC and the skills gap thesis, notes that in our current political debate “education is said to be the cure both for unemployment and income inequality.”¹⁹⁹ As Mishel noted in a recent EPI publication: “Delivering the appropriate education and training to workers becomes the primary if not sole policy challenge if we hope to restore full employment in the short and medium term and if we expect to prevent a (further) loss of competitiveness and a further rise in wage and income inequality in the longer term.”²⁰⁰ Among the moderate Democratic and Republican elites that back the educational reform movement, education not only becomes the answer to our long-term inequality problem, it also addresses our short-term unemployment problem. These academic analyses contribute to the widespread belief that we must prepare American workers for an ever-shifting labor market in which only the highly-educated and trained will attain a decent standard of living.

III. The Alternatives to Education-Driven Analysis

i. Questioning Skill Biased Technological Change

Not all public policy analysts agree that SBTC played a predominant role in increasing income inequality. In their best-selling *Winner Take-All Politics*, political

¹⁹⁸ Levine, “The Skills Gap and Unemployment in Wisconsin,” 17.

¹⁹⁹ Lawrence Mishel, “The Overselling of Education,” *The American Prospect*, February 7, 2011, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://prospect.org/article/overselling-education-0>.

²⁰⁰ Lawrence Mishel, “Education is Not the Cure for High Unemployment or for Income Inequality,” *Economic Policy Institute*, January 12, 2011, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.epi.org/publication/education_is_not_the_cure_for_high_unemployment_or_for_income_inequality/.

scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue that SBTC and the broader discourse around educational attainment's relationship to earnings advances a false explanation of the rise in inequality. The “un-skilled” versus “skilled” or “educated” versus “non-educated” portrays a society in which the college educated population has seen a major increase in their standard of living over the past 30 years, while those who are less skilled have not.²⁰¹ In reality, however, inequality has been driven by the massive divergence between the income and wealth of the top few percent of families and the rest of society.²⁰² Thus SBTC cannot explain how the income share captured by the top one percent rose from 9.9 percent in 1979 to 23.5 percent in 2007.²⁰³ The “superstar” economy and the exceptional rise of inequality in the United States from the late 1970s onwards cannot be explained by SBTC or by a decline in educational attainment.²⁰⁴ Ultimately, they argue, the “winner-take-all economy” derives from the massive increase in the political power of the most affluent and the influence of this class on public policy: “Government has enormous power to affect the distribution of ‘market income,’ that is, earnings before government taxes and benefits take effect. Think about laws governing unions; the minimum wage; regulations of corporate governance; rules for financial markets, including the management of risk for high-

²⁰¹ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 35-36.

²⁰² Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All*, 36.

²⁰³ Estelle Sommeiller and Mark Price, *The Increasingly Unequal States of America, Income Inequality by State, 1917-2011* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, February 2014), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://s2.epi.org/files/2014/Income-Inequality-by-State-Final.pdf>, 5.

²⁰⁴ Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All*, 44. Hacker and Pierson write: “The return to schooling—and especially to a college degree—has risen. But, as we’ve seen, rising American inequality is not mainly about the gap between the college-educated and the rest, or indeed about educational gaps in general. It is about the pulling away of the very top. Those at the top are often highly educated, yes, but so, too, are those just below them who have been left increasingly behind. I think you need some data here.”

stakes economic ventures; and so on.”²⁰⁵

Hacker and Pierson’s argument is part of a slew of criticisms of the SBTC framework. From the first mention of SBTC, left economists such as David Howell, James K. Galbraith, Lawrence Mishel, as well as more mainstream economists including David Card, John DiNardo, Alan Manning, and others have presented strong critiques of the SBTC thesis.²⁰⁶ Economists David Card and John DiNardo were among the first to point out that while technological progress continued to advance in the 1990s and 2000s, the growth in inequality during this period was mostly caused by the rapid rise in incomes at the very top of the distribution scale, rather than in the middle-to-upper middle class income ranges where one would have expected SBTC to have the greatest impact.²⁰⁷

These economists also challenge the claim that educational increases have failed to keep pace with labor market demand. Lawrence Mishel, John Schmitt, and Heidi Shierholz argue in an EPI publication that educational attainment levels played little role in the origins of labor market polarization. While they agree that technology has altered the labor market – noting an increasing trend towards more white-collar and less blue- and pink-collar work for many decades – they do not agree

²⁰⁵ Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All*, 44.

²⁰⁶ See, for example: James K. Galbraith, *Created Unequal: The Crisis in American Pay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Brad Plumer, “How Economists Have Misunderstood Inequality: An Interview with James Galbraith,” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/how-economists-have-misunderstood-inequality/2012/05/03/gIQAOZf5yT_blog.html. Lawrence Mishel, Josh Bivens, Elise Gould, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America, 12th Edition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), and <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/>. David Howell, “Theory-Driven Facts and the Growth in Earnings Inequality,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 31:1 (1999), 54-86; David Card and John E. DiNardo, “Skill-Biased Technological Change and Rising Wage Inequality: Some Problems and Puzzles,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 20:4 (2002), 733-83; Maarten Goos and Alan Manning, “Lousy and Lovely Jobs: The Rising Polarization of Work in Britain,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 89:1 (2007), 118–133.

²⁰⁷ David Card and John E. DiNardo, “Skill-Biased Technological Change and Rising Wage Inequality: Some Problems and Puzzles,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 20:4 (2002), 733-83.

that education has been unable to meet the increase in demand for skilled workers:

These changes in the occupational structure are primarily technology-driven and have increased the skills and education employers seek in the labor market which, in turn, necessitates an educational upgrading of the workforce. This is what Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz refer to as the “race between technology and skills.” We believe there has been such a race, that technology has had a major effect, *but also that the education and skills have greatly improved and satisfied that increased demand.*²⁰⁸

Referring to the alleged “skill premium,” Mishel and his colleagues note that “in the race between skills and technology since 1979 there has been roughly a tie. This has especially been the case since 1995, after which the college premium has barely grown.” And in the past ten years, real wages have been flat or falling for the majority of college graduates, across nearly every occupational group.²⁰⁹ Their data show that “jobs at every education and skill level have not seen appropriate wage growth [over the past 30-40 years].” Similarly, in response to Acemoglu, Autor, and Dorn’s new “polarization” framework, which claims that technological change has eliminated “middle-skill” jobs that used to pay a good wage but that can now be easily automated, Mishel and his team point out that “such ‘middling occupations’ have been declining throughout the entire period covered by their data, 1959–2007, which includes periods when wage inequality was stable as well as ones when wage inequality was growing.”²¹⁰

Instead of putting the blame for rising inequality on SBTC, Mishel, Schmitt, and Shierholz point to a combination of political and economic policy factors similar

²⁰⁸ Mishel, Shierholz, and Schmitt, “Don’t Blame the Robots.”

²⁰⁹ Mishel, Bivens, Gould, and Shierholz, *The State of Working America*.

²¹⁰ Lawrence Mishel, Heidi Shierholz, and John Schmitt, “Assessing the Job Polarization Explanation of Growing Wage Inequality,” paper presented at the Labor Economics Seminar at the University of California Berkeley, March 7, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, http://emlab.berkeley.edu/users/webfac/moretti/e251_s13/mishel.pdf.

to those proposed by Hacker and Pierson. They argue that growing income inequality has largely been driven by changes in macroeconomic policies (fiscal, exchange rate, and monetary policies that affect unemployment and trade) and trade policy, as well as the increasing financialization of the economy.²¹¹ They also contend that policies that promoted decreases in union density, a decline in the real value of the minimum wage, and deregulation of the financial industry have contributed to the rise in inequality.²¹² Thus, according to those who favor a political explanation for rising inequality as an alternative to the SBTC thesis, it is not that technological change has caused a disproportionate increase in demand for “highly skilled workers.” Rather, they argue, workers with less than a college degree are more likely to be affected by the decline in the minimum wage, increased competition from international trade, and the declining power of unions. They go on to claim that the same policies that caused a lack of wage growth for those workers are now affecting more middle-strata workers.

Obviously not everyone who sees a role for SBTC in engendering growing inequality deems it the only relevant factor. Timothy Noah, who contends that a decline in the rate of growth in educational attainment has significantly contributed to rising income inequality, put together a “crude composite of [his] discussions with and reading of the various economists and political scientists” and argued that education is responsible for 30 percent of rising income inequality. By contrast the decline of labor is responsible for 20 percent, tax policy is responsible for 5 percent,

²¹¹ Lawrence Mishel, Heidi Shierholz, and John Schmitt, “Assessing the Job Polarization Explanation of Growing Wage Inequality,” *Economic Policy Institute*, January 11, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/wp295-assessing-job-polarization-explanation-wage-inequality/>.

²¹² Mishel, Shierholz, and Schmitt, “Assessing the Job Polarization Explanation of Growing Wage Inequality.”

trade is responsible for 10 percent, and Wall Street and corporate boards' pampering of the rich is responsible for 30 percent. Thus, Noah claims an important, though not singularly important role, for skill biased technological change in the rise in inequality. Joseph Stiglitz makes a similar argument, and argues that we need a multifaceted response to inequality, going beyond calls for increases in educational attainment: "There is a growing consensus among economists that it is hard to parse out cleanly and precisely the roles of different forces [in causing inequality]... Each of the factors that have contributed to inequality has to be addressed."²¹³

Still, many of the economists we have already discussed emphasize SBTC and declining rates of educational attainment as the primary or predominant cause of growing earnings inequality. Just a glimpse at the writing of Goldin and Katz, authors of the canonical SBTC volume *The Race Between Education and Technology*, illustrate the polarization in the causes of inequality debate: "The rise and decline of unions plays a supporting role in the story [of wage inequality], as do immigration and outsourcing. But not much of a role. Stripped to essentials, the ebb and flow of wage inequality is all about education and technology."²¹⁴

The dissenters to SBTC not only reject this causal narrative, but also hold that the SBTC narrative itself allows policy-makers to argue that there are few policy tools that can redress inequality, other than increasing the educational attainment of our workforce. Hacker and Pierson, as well as Mishel and his colleagues argue that skill biased technological change is only a small part of the story and that SBTC

²¹³ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: Norton, 2012), 100-101.

²¹⁴ Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, "The Future of Inequality: The Other Reason Education Matters So Much," (Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2009) accessed March 31, 2014, http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/4341691/GoldenKatz_EdIneq.pdf?sequence=1.

distracts policy makers and politicians from focusing on other, more preventable, causes of growing economic inequality. Mishel argues that the notion that education is responsible for growing inequality is not only simplistic, it is politically popular: “[This analysis] identifies ‘failing’ schools and dumb workers for the economic calamity actually caused by a deregulated financial sector following a massive redistribution of income and wealth.”²¹⁵ Those who reject the SBTC argue that educational reform and training alone cannot redress growing inequality; rather, American politics has to address the proliferation of non-unionized, low-wage jobs, and the growing ability of the rich to deregulate the credit and banking system and to decrease the rate of taxation on high pre-tax incomes.

ii. The Skills Gap Thesis: Similar, But Even Less Applicable

The skills gap thesis rests on even shakier ground than does the SBTC argument; most macroeconomists agree that current high unemployment rates, particularly among the young, are largely caused by “cyclical” and not “structural” factors; that is, mass unemployment is a problem of deficient “aggregate demand.”²¹⁶ As Dean Baker and other critics of the skills gap thesis note, if skills-based structural unemployment is the issue, then we should note some major sector(s) of the economy where the number of job openings is greater than the number of available workers.

²¹⁵ Mishel, “The Overselling of Education.”

²¹⁶ Despite conservative economists claims to the contrary, even the Federal Reserve’s research staff rejects structural explanations of unemployment. See: Rob Valletta and Katherine Kuang, “Is Structural Unemployment on the Rise?” *Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco*, November 8, 2010, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/publications/economic-letter/2010/november/structural-unemployment-rise/>. Of course, liberal economists have persistently labored to show that unemployment is cyclical not structural. See Arjun Jayadev and Mike Konczal, “The Stagnating Labor Market,” *Roosevelt Institute*, September 19, 2010, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.rooseveltinstitute.org/sites/all/files/stagnant_labor_market.pdf; Lawrence Mishel, Heidi Shierholz, and Kathryn Edwards, “Reasons for Skepticism About Structural Unemployment: Examining the Demand-Side Evidence,” *Economic Policy Institute*, September 22, 2010, accessed March 30, 2014, http://epi.3cdn.net/c1218e8213c58051e4_tlm6b5tf9.pdf.

However, as Baker notes, in every sector, the number of unemployed drastically exceeded the number of job openings.²¹⁷ The skills requirements of American industry did not suddenly change between 2007-09, somehow eliminating the employability of 8.8 million Americans, across all industries, and creating a new demand for highly skilled Americans.²¹⁸

Heidi Shierholz published a January 2014 study with EPI that looked for any indication that persistent unemployment and “missing workers” could be the result of a skills mismatch. Looking at job openings, hours worked by American workers, and wage trends, she found “no evidence of skills shortages as a major cause of today’s elevated unemployment.”²¹⁹ Instead, “The evidence on wages, hours, job openings, and unemployment across demographic groups, industries, and occupations, all confirm broad-based weakened demand for workers.”²²⁰ She notes that competing claims about structural shifts in such as a “housing lock” (people cannot relocate to find new work) or unemployment insurance extensions (people are unwilling to take work and thus lose unemployment insurance) that have kept individuals out of the job market are simply not supported by the evidence.²²¹

Contrary evidence actually suggests that the economy is not generating a sufficient number of jobs that demand the skills of the college educated. As Marc Levine points out, among low-skilled occupations such as retail salespersons, waiters and waitresses, amusement and recreation attendants, and bartenders, between 15-25

²¹⁷ Dean Baker, “Can You Find the Structural Unemployment?” Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2, 2011, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/cepr-blog/can-you-find-the-structural-unemployment>.

²¹⁸ Baker, “Can You Find the Structural Unemployment?”

²¹⁹ Shierholz, “Is There Really a Shortage of Skilled Workers?”

²²⁰ Shierholz, “Is There Really a Shortage of Skilled Workers?”

²²¹ Shierholz, “Is There Really a Shortage of Skilled Workers?”

percent of all employees held B.A. degrees or more.²²² The college-educated share of employment in these occupations has grown significantly since 1970. In 1970, fewer than 5 percent of retail salespersons had a college degree; by 2010, the share had jumped to 25 percent. And in 1970 only 1 percent of taxi drivers were college graduates, but by 2010 more than 15 percent were.²²³ The research of Richard Vedder, Christopher Denhart, and Jonathan Robe tells us a very different story from the one we hear in popular discourse: “The proportion of college graduates has grown faster than the demand for high-skilled jobs. Employers previously would not dream of explicitly or implicitly requiring a college degree for a bartender’s job, but they now have the luxury of imposing that requirement. The vast increase in the supply of college graduates has created a demand for them that has nothing to do with the technical proficiencies for the job acquired in college.”²²⁴ The increasing under-employment of college graduates should lead us to recognize that our problem is not a skills deficit but a shortage of “good jobs.”

In response to this argument some will argue that “highly-educated” and “highly-skilled” are two different things. That is, we commonly hear that under-employed retail salespersons are in low-wage work because they made the egregious error of studying art history rather than biology or engineering. Indeed, the notion that we face a shortage of STEM-trained workers (STEM stands for “Science, Technology, Mathematics, and Engineering”) is very much related to SBTC and

²²² Levine, “The Skills Gap and Unemployment in Wisconsin,” 19.

²²³ Levine, “The Skills Gap and Unemployment in Wisconsin,” 19.

²²⁴ Richard Vedder, Christopher Denhart, and Jonathan Robe, *Why Are Recent College Graduates Underemployed? University Enrollments and Labor-Market Realities* (Washington, D.C.: Center for College Affordability and Productivity, January 2013), accessed March 30, 2014, <http://centerforcollegeaffordability.org/uploads/Underemployed%20Report%202.pdf>.

skills gap explanations of inequality and unemployment. Much like the skills gap, the STEM-shortage seems to be more myth than reality. In a summary of the relevant research in the *Columbia Journalism Review* Beryl Lieff Benderly noted that there exists “a genuine shortage not of homegrown scientists but of viable career opportunities for those scientists.”²²⁵ One of the most comprehensive studies that Benderly cites is by B. Lindsay Lowell, Director of Policy Studies at Georgetown University, and Hal Salzman, Professor of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University; their 2007 article shows that the “available evidence indicates an ample supply of students whose preparation and performance has been increasing over the past decades. We are concerned that the consensus prescriptions [encouraging more math and science education] are based on some misperceptions about efficient strategies for economic and social prosperity.”²²⁶ Broadly speaking, Lowell and Salzman agree that the obsession over the purported STEM-shortage results from an ideological belief that the only way to restore shared prosperity to American workers is for American workers to acquire the proper education and skills.

If the skills gap and the STEM-shortage analyses are so inadequate, why do employers continue to claim that they cannot find qualified workers? Peter Capelli, author of *Why Good People Can't Get Jobs: The Skills Gap and What Companies Can Do About It*, offers a non-conspiratorial thesis.²²⁷ Employers have shifted away from training employees and increasingly demand workers with experience. As

²²⁵ Beryl Lieff Benderly, “What Scientist Shortage?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, January 17, 2012 accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.cjr.org/reports/what_scientist_shortage.php?page=all.

²²⁶ Lindsay Lowell and Harold Salzman, *Into the Eye of the Storm: Assessing the Evidence on Science and Engineering Education, Quality, and Workforce Demand* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, October 2007), accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.urban.org/publications/411562.html>.

²²⁷ Peter Capelli, *Why Good People Can't Get Jobs: The Skills Gap and What Companies Can Do About It* (Philadelphia: Wharton Digital Press, 2012).

Capelli noted in an interview, “When they rank the issues they say are important, academic skills are way, way down near the bottom. What they do complain about is work experience. They want someone who has done this exact job before and doesn’t need training.” And, indeed, a 2012 Accenture survey found that only 21 percent of employees said they had acquired new skills through company-provided training over the past five years.²²⁸ By contrast, employee training was commonplace in the 1970s, Cappelli argues. As businesses become more cost conscious, they shed training: thirty-eight percent of companies said they cross-train employees to develop skills not directly related to their job, according to a recent survey by the Society for Human Resource Management—down from 43 percent in 2011 and 55 percent in 2008.²²⁹ In addition, companies have shifted money away from Human Resource departments and begun using computer algorithms to make hiring decisions. These programs, while cheaper in the short term, do not judge what resumes and applications indicate about an applicants’ combination of abilities, education, or experience, but search for keywords and reject as unqualified all applications that do not use exact, predetermined phraseology.²³⁰ Cappelli finds the workforce “largely competent and able” and able to fill the jobs up for offer. The real problem is that “the hiring process by which supply and demand are brought together is an absolute mess.”²³¹

²²⁸ Paul Davidson, “Companies’ Training Cuts Add to Jobless Woes,” *USA Today*, August 9, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014 <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/workplace/story/2012-08-09/job-training/56922438/1>.

²²⁹ Davidson, “Companies’ Training Cuts Add to Jobless Woes.”

²³⁰ Beryl Lieff Benderly, “America’s Real Job Gap,” *Science*, October 5, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014.

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2012_10_05/carecredit.a1200112.

²³¹ Beryl Lieff Benderly, “America’s Real Job Gap.”

Ultimately, whether or not policy-makers and politicians understand the current jobs crisis to be structural or cyclical in nature has huge implications for policy. As Heidi Shierholz notes:

If high unemployment is due to workers not having the right skills, then the correct policy prescription is to focus on education and training, and macroeconomic policy to boost aggregate demand will not reduce unemployment. Policymakers and commentators who are against fiscal stimulus have a strong incentive to accept and propagate the myth that today's high unemployment is because workers lack the right skills.²³²

Complaining about an inability to fill jobs has the added benefit of spurring government action on molding education reform and vocational training programs that fit employers' desires.

IV. The Lonely Politics of Social Democracy

In order to lessen inequality, policy-makers and political actors should focus less on increasing societal educational attainment levels and more on macroeconomic fiscal policy that increases the number of good jobs. The jobs we have been creating during the tepid recovery from the Great Recession have been disproportionately low wage jobs, and we must reverse that trend.²³³ We need to raise the minimum wage and restore the right to form a union in order to promote broadly shared economic prosperity.

Amidst a long-term crisis of insufficient demand, in part due to upward redistribution of wealth and income (and crippling indebtedness on the part of those whose incomes lag), prescribing "more education" as the solution will only fuel the existing rat race of too many highly educated Americans chasing too few good jobs.

²³² Heidi Shierholz, "Is There Really a Shortage of Skilled Workers?" *Economic Policy Institute*, January 23, 2014, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/shortage-skilled-workers/>.

²³³ Brad Plumer, "How the Recession Turned Middle-Class Jobs Into Low-Wage Jobs," *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, wapo.st/19hDrir.

We must engage in job creation that matches skilled workers with well-paying jobs.

Economist John Schmitt makes this argument through a musical chairs metaphor:

Think of education as something that helps you to get a little faster to a chair or to be more strategic about where you're going to be when the music stops... what you'll observe is that the educated workers are going to get the jobs that are left (the chairs that are free)... The problem that we have now is not to make it so workers can rush faster to the chairs. What we need is more chairs. And the way you get chairs is by following macroeconomic policy in the long term."²³⁴

None of this means that the American population is over-educated and that we should restrict admission to American universities. Rather, it means that given our current public policies higher education no longer guarantees a college degree recipient full-time, dignified, decently paying work with a clear career track involving good benefits and a path for promotion and income enhancement.

Such good jobs are certainly out of the reach of the sixty-five percent of the 20-30 year old cohort who will not receive bachelors or graduate degrees. Much of the education reform discourse fails to address the possibility that even if we raised college degree attainment to say, 50-60 percent (60 percent being the highest in today's OECD countries), workers who attain only a high-school degree (or less) still need a way to make a living.²³⁵ After all, while technology alters the labor market, it does not mean that all jobs in the future will be high skilled – nor does it necessitate that “low skilled” work must be low paid. Whenever education reformers talk about solving our jobs crisis, inequality, or American competitiveness by up-skilling our

²³⁴ John Schmitt speaking on panel “Is Education the Answer,” at Roosevelt Institute conference “A Bold Approach to the Jobs Emergency: Setting the Political Agenda for 2014 and 2016,” June 4, 2013, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://rooseveltinstitute.org/bold-approach-jobs-emergency>.

²³⁵ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012), accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.oecd.org/edu/EAG%202012_e-book_EN_200912.pdf, 26.

workforce, they talk as if the future economy will be (or could be, given a properly trained workforce) a world of good high-tech and high-skilled jobs—and that there will be plenty of these jobs to go around. But many jobs created over the next 20 years will not require more than a high school degree. According to projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 62.6 percent of new jobs and 69.2 percent of job openings due to growth and replacement needs between 2010-2020 are expected to be in jobs requiring a high school degree or less; these occupations made up 69.3 percent of all jobs in 2010.²³⁶ Of the 30 occupations projected to have the largest numeric job increase between 2010-2020, a high school diploma or less is sufficient to enter 23 of them; a bachelor's degree or higher degree is required for only four.²³⁷ It is true that jobs that will experience the largest percentage increase in employment tend to require some college or even a college degree. Of the 30 occupations that will experience the largest percentage growth, 12 require a bachelor's or graduate degree, 5 require an associates degree, and 13 will require a high school diploma or less.²³⁸ But our need to fill these new job expansions should not distract us from the fact that an estimated 28 percent of workers are expected to hold low-wage jobs in 2020, roughly the same percentage as in 2010 (the study, undertaken at EPI, defines low-paying jobs as those with wages at or below what full-time workers must earn to live above the poverty level for a family of four.)²³⁹ As John Schmitt noted in an interview with CNN Money, workers occupying such low-wage jobs are increasingly better

²³⁶ C. Brett Lockard and Michael Wolf, "Employment Outlook: 2010-2020: Occupational Employment Projections to 2020," *Monthly Labor Review*, January 2012, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2012/01/art5full.pdf>.

²³⁷ Lockard and Wolf, "Employment Outlook."

²³⁸ Lockard and Wolf, "Employment Outlook."

²³⁹ Tami Luhby, "Low Paying Jobs Are Here to Stay," *CNN Money*, August 2, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://money.cnn.com/2012/08/02/news/economy/low-pay-jobs/index.htm>.

educated than they were in the past.²⁴⁰ If lower wage service jobs are here to stay and cannot simply be eliminated by increased levels of educational attainment, then policies such as raising the minimum wage and enhancing labor rights might promote increased earnings for workers in these sectors.

Even if Autor and his fellow economists are correct that technological changes have transformative effects on labor markets, this does not necessarily justify disproportionate income shares going to a few Americans. It may be reasonable to worry that the future may not have enough “good jobs” to go around, even though we will remain a wealthy and highly productive society. Even if wages could be raised through increasing the minimum wage, providing a path to citizenship for immigrants, and restoring a true legal right to organize unions, there may be limits to how productive (and thus how well-paid) care and service-jobs can be. But we cannot allow this to justify radical inequality and narrowly focus on increased educational attainment as the sole policy response to “the race between technology and education.” Other societies can and have chosen to use progressive forms of taxation (and even non-progressive forms such as the value-added tax) to fund social programs (such as public childcare and universal healthcare) so as to “decommodify” (or take out of the private market) the provision of certain basic human needs. These are programs that have alleviated poverty in more “social market” forms of capitalist societies, but which are not considered when we attribute inequality and unemployment to deficits in educational attainment.

²⁴⁰ Luhby, “Low Paying Jobs Are Here to Stay.”

There remains a small, social-democratic left that recognizes this: for example, while Paul Krugman largely agrees with David Autor and company's argument as to how technological change yields "polarization," in the labor market, Krugman goes beyond the typical, SBTC policy prescriptions. Part of Krugman's social democratic politics derives from his fear that there simply are not enough good jobs in our 21st-century economy to go around (even if we engaged in a more active stimulus). Krugman worries that technological change is increasingly displacing "high skilled" as well as "low skilled" work. Summarizing a report from *The McKinsey Global Institute* report, Krugman wrote the following in a June 13, 2013 column:

The report suggests that we're going to be seeing a lot of 'automation of knowledge work,' with software doing things that used to require college graduates. Advanced robotics could further diminish employment in manufacturing, but it could also replace some medical professionals. So should workers simply be prepared to acquire new skills? What will happen to us if, like so many students, we go deep into debt to acquire the skills we're told we need, only to learn that the economy no longer wants those skills? Education, then, is no longer the answer to rising inequality, if it ever was (which I doubt).²⁴¹

Krugman's prescription points towards a need for more redistributive and pro-labor policies:

Yes, we need to fix American education. In particular, the inequalities Americans face at the starting line — bright children from poor families are less likely to finish college than much less able children of the affluent — aren't just an outrage; they represent a huge waste of the nation's human potential. But there are things education can't do. In particular, the notion that putting more kids through college can restore the middle-class society we used to have is wishful thinking. It's no longer true that having a college degree guarantees that you'll get a good job, and it's becoming less true with each passing decade. So if we want a society of broadly shared prosperity, education isn't the answer — we'll have to go about building that society

²⁴¹ Paul Krugman, "Sympathy for the Luddites," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/opinion/krugman-sympathy-for-the-luddites.html>.

directly. We need to restore the bargaining power that labor has lost over the last 30 years, so that ordinary workers as well as superstars have the power to bargain for good wages. We need to guarantee the essentials, above all health care, to every citizen.²⁴²

Krugman has little influence on mainstream Democratic policy-making circles because what he is advocating is a pro-labor, social democratic agenda that runs counter to the pro-business instincts of the bipartisan policy consensus.

The task before us is to change the political policy discourse and distribution of political power so that we can redress the fact that the labor market proliferates low-wage work. How do we build a redistributive politics that redresses over thirty years of bipartisan neoliberal policies of deunionization, deregulation, and regressive tax reforms that defund social programs? In an age of austerity politics and “fix the debt” ideology, when expanding access to health care through a public subsidy to private medical providers and private insurers is attacked as socialist, it is hard to imagine the political and social transformation that would be needed to put the de-commodification of child care and pre-school on the agenda, let alone paid parental leave and an enhancement, rather than contraction, of income support for seniors and the unemployed. These are the types of programs needed to redress growing inequality; educational reform, in and of itself, will fail to do so.

As evidenced by interviews in a *New York Times* Business Section feature covering the debate between Mishel and Autor and Katz, SBTC and skills gap economists at times acknowledge the need for social efforts aimed at tackling inequality and unemployment that go beyond increasing overall educational attainment; the ideological use that education reformers and politicians make of the

²⁴² Paul Krugman, “Degrees and Dollars,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2011, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/opinion/07krugman.html?_r=0.

work of David Autor, Lawrence Katz, Claudia Goldin, and other academics may downplay these authors' own recognition of the need for other public policy efforts. In his *New York Times* Business Section article, journalist Eduardo Porter noted that the belief that education and technology are solely responsible for growing inequality "provides political leaders an excuse to cast the problem as beyond the reach of policy."²⁴³ As Autor told Porter, "[Education] can suck all the air out of the conversation," and added, "All economists should be pushing back against this simplistic view."²⁴⁴ But when Autor and Katz's work is taken out of the academic world and into the public policy arena, politicians use it as a justification for the view that education reform is the solution to a laundry list of social problems, including poverty and economic inequality. This "solution" is popular with even mainstream Democratic politicians because it does not challenge the neoliberal faith in lower effective tax rates, "fiscal responsibility," curtailed entitlement spending, and weakened unions as the best means for reviving a stagnant American economy. Pushback against such a worldview cannot come from economists alone; after all, the work of Krugman, Mishel, Hacker, Pierson, Shierholz, Schmitt and others has yet to have major influence on public policy. In fact, it is likely that Autor's work is more readily accepted in the media and in public policy circles precisely because he does not engage in such "push back."²⁴⁵ Breaking the obsession with education will

²⁴³ Eduardo Porter, "Rethinking the Rise of Inequality," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/13/business/rethinking-the-income-gap-and-a-college-education.html?pagewanted=1>.

²⁴⁴ Porter, "Rethinking the Rise of Inequality."

²⁴⁵ The Center for Economic and Policy Research made this point about Autor's work in a blog post, noting that, "The view that inequality is simply the result of technical change and there isn't much we can do about it has plenty of rich and powerful adherents." See "Wage Inequality: Opening Salvo," CEPR, January 12, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/beat-the-press/wage-inequality-opening-salvo>.

necessitate the building of social and institutional power for working people, the poor, and increasingly underemployed and indebted recent college graduates; we will not change policy discourse through academic and intellectual contestation alone.

Our discussion of education serving as the solution to eradicating inequality, unemployment, and low-wage work has elucidated how much we Americans hold on to the belief that the education system serves as a meritocratic sorting mechanism in which individuals' resulting labor market outcomes are fairly deserved. It is in the context of this belief that we seem to forget the political causes of inequality, poverty, and unemployment, and absolve government of the broader role it must play in resolving these inequities. Furthermore, entirely missing from our political debate is any recognition of the continued proliferation of low-wage work. The narrow paradigm of education reform fails to query whether it is just that those who fail to "succeed" in this alleged meritocratic race for "good jobs" are denied decent life opportunities for themselves and their dependents. Thus this thesis has brought us to consider not only equality of opportunity but also inequality, distributive justice, and merit. The following chapter will unite these analyses in a reflection on our obsession with education's role in creating a more just United States.

CHAPTER 4:
The American Obsession With Education:
A Critical Examination of America’s Commitment to Equality of
Opportunity and a Call for Democratic Equality

I. Inequality and Opportunity

For a brief moment in December 2013 it appeared that President Obama would shift the focus of the remaining years of his presidency to fighting inequality, which he described as the “defining challenge of our time.”²⁴⁶ But by the end of January 2014 Obama shifted his rhetorical focus from “inequality” to restoring “opportunity.” “What I believe unites the people of this nation,” he said in his State of the Union, “regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all – the notion that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can get ahead.”²⁴⁷ *The New York Times* chronicled the shift in Jackie Calmes’s article, “In Talk of Economy, Obama Turns to ‘Opportunity’ Over ‘Inequality.’”²⁴⁸ Cited in the article was Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster, who justified in pragmatic political terms the shift of the debate away from talk of “inequality” and towards a politics of “opportunity”:

However salient reducing income inequality may be, it is demonstrably less important to voters than any number of other priorities. Do this thought experiment: If you could only achieve one, would you rather reduce poverty

²⁴⁶ Jim Kuhnhenh, “Obama: Income Inequality Is ‘Defining Challenge Of Our Time,’” *Huffington Post*, December 4, 2014, accessed March 24, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/04/obama-income-inequality_n_4384843.html.

²⁴⁷ Barack Obama, “President Barack Obama’s State of the Union Address” (speech, Washington D.C., January 28, 2014), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/28/president-barack-obamas-state-union-address>.

²⁴⁸ Jackie Calmes, “In Talk of Economy, Obama Turns to ‘Opportunity’ Over ‘Inequality,’” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2014, accessed March 23, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/04/us/politics/obama-moves-to-the-right-in-a-partisan-war-of-words.html?_r=1.

or reduce income inequality? Most people are like you, choosing poverty, putting inequality at least second even on this list of two.²⁴⁹

Unfortunately, inequality plays a central causal role in decreasing social mobility and equality of opportunity. Thus former Secretary of Labor, economist Robert Reich, criticized Obama's rhetorical shift: "Obama was correct in December when he called widening inequality 'the defining challenge of our time.' He mustn't back down now even if Democratic pollsters tell him to. If we're ever to reverse this noxious trend, Americans have to hear the truth."²⁵⁰

At the heart of Reich's concern is a worry that a rhetorical commitment to "equality of opportunity" does not require a commitment to lessening inequality. It can be a call for greater equality, if we mean by equality of opportunity what philosopher John Rawls terms "fair equality of opportunity," which demands considerable reductions in social inequality. But conservatives, and many moderate Democratic politicians, do not admit that reductions in inequality are necessary to realize fair equality of opportunity. Attributing poverty to cultural rather than structural issues, and stressing the value of the "work ethic," they put forward a competing, conservative, and more limited vision of equality of opportunity. This conception of equality of opportunity aligns with traditional American values of "rugged individualism" and individual responsibility. It conforms more closely to what Rawls termed "formal equality of opportunity," or "careers open to talents," which requires only non-discrimination on the basis of ascriptive characteristics such

²⁴⁹ Mark Mellman, "Inequality: Big problem, Poor Message," *The Hill*, January 14, 2014, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://thehill.com/opinion/mark-mellman/195466-mark-mellman-inequality-big-problem-poor-message#ixzz2wLCpwFjO>.

²⁵⁰ Robert Reich, "Why Widening Inequality Is Hobbling Equal Opportunity," accessed March 22, 2014, <http://robertreich.org/post/75696787369>.

as sex, race, or religion. Conservatives and their moderate allies argue that government efforts to decrease inequality actually pervert incentives to work hard and climb the social ladder, thus actually thwarting equality of opportunity. Given the proper incentives, an absence of legal discrimination, and proper reforms to education, even the poorest students can learn “grit,” and our society can successfully balance radical inequality of outcomes with equality of opportunity.

Since the center-right has been able to define “equality of opportunity” in this limited way, the left must counter by reintroducing a broad understanding of those structural inequalities that prevent the realization of fair equality of opportunity. This will entail defending access to those “primary goods” that enable individuals to compete successfully in the educational system and in the labor market, including resources that exist “outside” of the school. It will require a demand that all children are not only held “accountable,” but are provided with decent health care, pre-school, after-school, and neighborhood resources so that they can succeed.

This will be an uphill battle in the American political context; thus it may come as a surprise that I argue we must not confine ourselves to the language of equality of opportunity and we must embrace and defend the concept of “democratic equality.” When Paul Tough appeared on *The Tavis Smiley Show*, Smiley questioned Tough as to the importance of his book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Importance of Character*. Tough argued that science was giving us a better idea as to how poverty affects children and their academic success, cluing us into which interventions are necessary. Smiley responded:

Why does it take science?... It troubles me that people have to have... a book laying out the science of what poverty does to kids for them to understand that

that suffering is real – and that as a society we ought to take that suffering seriously, and that poverty matters? Why does it take somebody having to do so much research to present a white paper with scientific data to convince them they, hey, we ought to do something about this?²⁵¹

This sentiment gets to the heart of so much discourse surrounding poverty in this country. We have known for some time now that poverty affects student achievement, and yet we are largely inert when it comes to investing in impoverished communities and giving poor people the support they need. I will argue in this chapter that this conundrum stems from the fact that the concept of equality of opportunity always lends itself to conservative recapture, in which the right shifts the language of equal opportunity in their direction in order to prevent the very egalitarian outcomes necessary to realize equal opportunity in its broadest forms. To do this, the right utilizes the language of the “deserving poor,” and the rugged individual who overcomes social obstacles to achievement. Representative Paul Ryan’s view, as quoted in *The New York Times* article I discussed earlier, epitomizes this conservative appropriation of the discourse of “equality of opportunity” in order to defend hyper-meritocracy. Ryan criticized president Obama for “shifting us away from the American idea — from a society of upward mobility — [to] talking to each other more in class terms.” Ryan continued, “Instead of focusing on equality of outcomes...we should be focusing on equality of opportunity.”²⁵²

Democratic equality, by contrast, rejects the notion that life is purely about creating a “fair competition,” and posits that we must temper our desires for fair competition with principles that promote solidarity and mutual respect among all

²⁵¹ “Tavis Smiley Interviews Writer Paul Tough,” PBS, November 11, 2012, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://video.pbs.org/video/2309289421/>.

²⁵² Calmes, “In Talk of Economy, Obama Turns to ‘Opportunity’ Over ‘Inequality.’”

members of the society. This position rejects the notion that those who do not “succeed” in the competition for scarce educational places or “good jobs” will be consigned to inhumane life circumstances not only for themselves, but also their children. This means defending a basic equality of citizenship that provides adequate access to those “primary goods” that enable individuals to develop their full potential. Since equality of opportunity can always be subverted to conservative ends, it is actually crucial to reintroduce the concept of democratic equality into American political discourse and set out to defend it in political and social life so that we can finally overcome the conservative claim that radical inequality of outcomes and equality of opportunity can happily coexist.

II. Education and Equality of Opportunity

Up to this point this thesis has sought to describe and analyze the education reformers, and probe some of the weaknesses of their analyses. Chapter One shows how this peculiar brand of education reform is a product of the broader neoliberal shift in American politics and the weakening of America’s liberal and social democratic left. Chapter Two questions the educational system’s potential to overcome the structural constraints of poverty and to realize genuine equality of opportunity. Chapter Three analyzes the limitations of a broader academic and public policy discourse that looks to increased educational attainment as the solution to a myriad of labor market problems, including inequality, low-wage jobs, unemployment, and underemployment. The perceived crisis in American education purportedly threatens equal opportunity, the life prospects for America’s children, and America’s global competitiveness. This overly optimistic view of education leads to

reformers' championing education as the "civil rights issue of our day" in attempting to justify their particular reforms²⁵³

In this country the political and ideological support for equality of opportunity has always been inextricably tied to a unique belief in the centrality of schools as a vehicle for meritocratic achievement and class mobility. As Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick write, "Americans want the educational system to help translate the American dream from vision to practice."²⁵⁴ The analyses that reformers and their political allies put forward rest firmly on a basic presupposition of American political discourse: that equality of opportunity is entirely consistent with significant inequalities of income and wealth (as well as social and cultural capital). Thus, having questioned education's ability to impact inequalities of opportunity and of outcomes, this chapter argues that Americans must engage in a deeper discussion of the relationship between equality of opportunity and equal citizenship.

I will outline the differences between conservative ideas of "formal equality of opportunity," Rawls's notion of fair equality of opportunity, and, finally, the ideal of democratic equality. I argue that American political life embraces a vision of equality of opportunity that is tempered by understandings of the "deserving poor," and a firm belief in individual responsibility for overcoming adverse social circumstances. This conservative vision marginalizes those radical aspects of the Civil Rights Movement that called for the elimination of poverty, economic inequality, and socio-economic and racial segregation, and it is this vision that makes the education reform movement so politically and ideologically important. In fact,

²⁵³ Ravitch, "Is Education the Civil Rights Issue of Our Day?"

²⁵⁴ Hochschild and Scovronick, 11.

many of the conservative and even moderate Democratic political elites who back school reform see traditional social democratic values as attacks on meritocracy, individual effort, and personal responsibility. Only a revival of commitments to fair equality of opportunity and to democratic equality will make it possible for our society to consider policies that would actually lessen growing class and racial inequality.

III. Equality of Opportunity: A Spectrum of Meanings

When exploring the meaning of equality of opportunity in *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls distinguishes between “formal equality of opportunity” and “fair equality of opportunity.”²⁵⁵ According to Rawls, the “career open to talents” of classical liberalism maintains only that there exists “a formal equality of opportunity in that all have at least the same legal rights of access to all advantaged social positions.”²⁵⁶ By contrast, “fair equality of opportunity” holds that “positions are to be not only open in a formal sense but that all should have a fair chance to attain them.”²⁵⁷ In other words, fair equality of opportunity holds that “those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances,” regardless of their social class or life circumstances.²⁵⁸

The formal conception of equality of opportunity defends non-discrimination and merit-based judgment in competition for (scarce) goods and positions in society. In this conception, all applicants for a relevant job or office should be evaluated on the basis of those qualities and attributes relevant for performance in that job or office. Every applicant then has an equal chance of success, at least in the legal sense.

²⁵⁵ Rawls, 72.

²⁵⁶ Rawls, 73.

²⁵⁷ Rawls, 73.

²⁵⁸ Rawls, 73.

This conception of equality of opportunity stresses individual and familial responsibility, while downplaying the structural inequalities and absence of access to basic resources that prevent some from succeeding. It does not concern itself with equalizing the resources – even schooling – necessary to provide fair equality of opportunity for all. In this view, to have a chance of attaining any given life outcome, regardless of their initial circumstances, requires only the absence of discrimination based on race, gender or other factors that are irrelevant to the qualifications necessary to take advantage of an educational opportunity or perform a job successfully.

The second, “fair” or “substantive” form of equality of opportunity, by contrast, devotes greater societal resources to socially disadvantaged communities and to the development of individuals from less advantaged backgrounds. Under this conception of “fair equality of opportunity,” Rawls holds that prospects for success are just only if they depend on natural talent and willingness to exert effort; they must not depend on family, neighborhood, or social class background. Critics of the educational reform movement implicitly draw upon this conception when they contend that the reform movement ignores the crucial importance of social policies that would integrate schools and neighborhoods by race and class, or that would devote extraordinary societal resources to create schools as “round the year” community centers in disadvantaged communities.

Which social resources we must equalize (and to what extent we must equalize them) in order to promote equality of fair opportunity is always subject to political debate. Economist and social theorist John Roemer argues that the level of

social provision we want the government to provide depends on what role we believe the state should play in limiting inequalities. In Roemer's language there exist a political conflict between the "nondiscrimination principle" of formal equality of opportunity and the "level-the-playing-field principle" of fair equality of opportunity. Roemer contends that both can be claimed as defenses of "equality of opportunity," and the difference between the two reflects the political differences between right and left in most democratic capitalist polities:

Among the citizenry of any advanced democracy we find individuals who hold a spectrum of views concerning what is required for equal opportunity, from the nondiscrimination at one pole to pervasive social provision to correct for all manner of disadvantage at the other. Common to all these views, however, is the precept that the equal opportunity principle at some point holds the individual accountable for the achievement of the advantage in question, whether that advantage be a level of educational achievement, health, employment status, income, or the economist's utility or welfare.²⁵⁹

Where one falls on this spectrum depends upon what value one places on the responsibility individual and family for their own life choices. If one places great value on individual responsibility for overcoming societal obstacles to success, then one need not be committed to eradicating structural inequalities (even though those structural inequalities impede such autonomous choice). Only the conception of fair equality of opportunity calls for reducing inequalities such that everyone has a realistic chance to succeed.

Similarly, in another work in normative theory, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family*, James Fishkin argues that a society faced with substantial socioeconomic inequalities must choose between a commitment to fair equality of opportunity or to the autonomy of the family. There is a fundamental conflict, Fishkin

²⁵⁹ John E. Roemer, "Equality of Opportunity," in *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality*, ed. Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles, and Steven Durlauf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 18.

argues, between fair equality of opportunity (which would require a substantial equality of condition) and the liberty of parents to exercise primary influence over the development of their children.²⁶⁰ Should we integrate neighborhoods, or should we allow (privileged) parents the right to raise their children in racially and class-segregated suburbs, as they so please? Of course, the structure of American federalism facilitates this “privatization” of public tax revenues of the affluent in racially- and class-segregated suburban public schools. But following Fishkin’s reasoning, the American belief that parents should have the right to pass on their advantages in economic, cultural, and educational capital to their children undoubtedly contributed to the failure of the civil rights movement to succeed in its more radical socio-economic goals: the integration of housing, schools, neighborhoods, and labor markets.²⁶¹

The dominant “Third Way” American ideology that has marginalized New Deal liberalism and embraced education reform offers a more limited, vision of equality of opportunity. This vision goes beyond formal equality of opportunity by recognizing that everyone should have access to quality education, but the reformers fail to recognize the limits that quality education faces in overcoming disadvantage. Because of this failure, their vision is closer to formal rather than fair equality of opportunity. Their vision stresses the power of education, in tandem with “hard work,” self-discipline, and healthy economic growth, to allow individuals to rise out

²⁶⁰ James Fishkin, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

²⁶¹ Whether or not “family autonomy” implies a right to resist socio-economic integration of neighborhoods and pass down privilege to one’s children is subject to debate. Does autonomy really imply a right to give one’s children a head start? I imagine that we can balance family autonomy (a right to privacy and intimacy, a wide range of acceptable options when it comes to choosing how to raise one’s child) with policies that promote social well-being and correct for social disadvantage more than Fishkin admits. But this is beyond the purview of this thesis.

of poverty. Our tolerance for inequality, obviously, is not new. Hochschild and Scovronick note that “Europeans believe more strongly that the state should ensure a decent standard of living for all its citizens [while] 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.”²⁶²

But Hochschild and Scovronick, writing in 2003 in their *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, fail to explore how this popular belief in education as sufficient to provide equality of opportunity links directly to America’s tolerance for greater inequality. They seem to fully understand which inequalities prevent the realization of fair equality of opportunity and recognize that “inequalities in family wealth are a major cause of inequalities in schooling.”²⁶³ They also understand that increasing segregation by race and class has a deleterious effect on those growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, noting that “high and growing economic similarity within communities undermines the collective goals of the American dream,” and that “the class background of a student’s classmates has a dramatic effect on that student’s level of success.”²⁶⁴ Their politics are pragmatic, and so they are pessimistic about the possibility of reviving efforts to integrate neighborhoods and/or schools by race and class, given that “direct efforts to integrate poor and better-off students... have been few and far between and have proven very difficult to accomplish.”²⁶⁵ Unlike the education reformers who focus on improving the performance of teachers in low-income school districts, Hochschild and Scovronick

²⁶² Roemer, 19.

²⁶³ Hochschild and Scovronick, 201.

²⁶⁴ Hochschild and Scovronick, 26.

²⁶⁵ Hochschild and Scovronick, 26.

do call for major public investments in our poorest school districts.²⁶⁶ Political realism leads them to place their primary hopes for reforms within existing urban schools, which are often attended almost exclusively by low-income students of color: “If poor and non-Anglo children,” they write, “continue to lack sufficient resources, good teachers, decent facilities, and real connections with other Americans, the ideology of the American dream will be just a cover for systematic injustice.”²⁶⁷ But as desirous and radical as such a demand may be, Hochschild and Scovronick, both progressive social scientists who have written widely on theories of inequality, do not call for equalization of resources outside of the school.

We must engage seriously with the elite consensus that, as President Bill Clinton argued in 1995, “The American Dream will succeed or fail in the 21st century in direct proportion to our commitment to educate every person in the United States of America.”²⁶⁸ We cannot simply focus on education and not endorse social policies that will tackle those inequalities “outside” of the school. We must equalize those broader economic, neighborhood, and cultural resources that Hochschild and Scovronick acknowledge make their way into the school. While we should not reject a call for an expanded investment in our most troubled schools, education reformers’ silence about the need to attack the pervasive concentration of poverty and inequality is telling of America’s current toleration for broader structural inequities.

While education reformers claim to be taking on the civil rights issue of our day, we must remember that paying lip-service to equality of opportunity does not

²⁶⁶ Hochschild and Scovronick, 200.

²⁶⁷ Hochschild and Scovronick, 201.

²⁶⁸ Bill Clinton, “Remarks at the Franklin D. Roosevelt 50th Anniversary Commemoration in Warm Springs, Georgia” (speech, Warm Springs, Georgia, April 12, 1995), The American Presidency Project, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51224>.

entail a providing the resources necessary to ensure “fair equality of opportunity.” Nor does a belief in a meritocratic school system necessarily yield a political commitment to the massive investment in public resources needed to combat “out-of-school” inequalities that make their way into the educational sphere. Our society’s failure to enact substantive equality of opportunity may not be primarily a case of hypocrisy or weakness of will. Rather, conservatives have succeeded in advancing their own vision of equality of opportunity that does not entail a commitment to eliminating the structural inequalities that pose barriers to working-class and poor children achieving their full potential.

IV. Say One Thing and Do Another: The Conservative Vision of Equality of Opportunity in America

The unique American acceptance of poverty and inequality is the legacy of a political discourse that has dominated American discussions of poverty since the Reagan administration.²⁶⁹ This “culture of poverty” discourse ignores structural inequalities and narrowly focuses on the supposed moral failings of poor people. In an era of deindustrialization and rising global competition that followed the affluent 1960s, the growth in of poverty and inequality became increasingly portrayed as a result of a widespread “culture of poverty.” Poverty came to be seen as caused by an absence of individual effort, rather than by structural barriers to realizing “equality of fair opportunity,” such as unequal access to basic resources, coupled with

²⁶⁹ There is something to be said for ignorance playing a role, too. Poverty is to some extent “invisible.” Many upper middle class Americans only see poverty through TV reports or from the windows of suburban commuter trains. See Dan Ariely, “Americans Want to Live in a Much More Equal Country (They Just Don’t Realize It),” *The Atlantic*, August 2, 2012, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/08/americans-want-to-live-in-a-much-more-equal-country-they-just-dont-realize-it/260639/>.

deindustrialization and the rapidly growing incarceration of young men of color, often for non-violent drug-related offenses.

A rising American conservatism argued that the War on Poverty had failed because it created perverse incentives for the poor to leave the formal labor market and live on “welfare handouts.” According to the conservative narrative, this welfare culture of dependency was responsible for a breakdown in the family structure, as well as increases in crime, drug use, poverty, illiteracy and most other social problems of America’s inner cities.²⁷⁰ This ideology, initially put forth by conservative pundits such as Charles Murray, was eventually accepted by many moderate Democratic advocates of ‘welfare reform’ in the 1990s. Beginning with Richard Nixon’s appeal to the “silent majority,” conservative politicians appealed to a section of the white working class that felt alienated by the radical and (perceived) chaotic politics of the 1960s’ anti-war movement, as well as increasing unrest and “riots” in the inner city (Newark 1965, Los Angeles 1965, Detroit 1967, and across the country after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968). This conservative political renaissance, which culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, provided an accessible, if inaccurate, narrative explanation for the economic destabilization that the massive loss of industrial jobs (deindustrialization) visited upon the working class from the 1970 recession onwards.

While the War on Poverty had focused largely on ensuring a social safety net for poor children and mothers, conservative political dominance altered the terms of social welfare policies and redistributive policies so that they focused on ending

²⁷⁰ R. Kent Weaver, *Ending Welfare As We Know It* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000), 106.

“dependence.”²⁷¹ This vision of “poverty as dependency” only served to reinforce Americans’ belief in the responsibility of the individual and family for their own fate, even in the face of great disadvantage. The result of the hegemony of American conservatism from the Reagan era onwards led to the consistent articulation of a conservative vision of a more “formal equality of opportunity,” one in which austerity and the incentives posed by an inegalitarian labor market were portrayed as a necessary means to penalize – and so allegedly motivate – the “undeserving poor.”

Both Nixon and Reagan hived off a significant portion of the white working-class electorate from the traditional New Deal Democratic coalition by blaming deindustrialization on excessive environmental regulation, overly powerful unions, and a liberal state that taxed hard-working whites in order to fund anti-poverty programs for the indolent poor, depicted as predominantly teenage single mothers of color (or “babies having babies”). Though means-tested anti-poverty programs only constituted a small portion of the federal and state budget (AFDC, child care, and child support enforcement costs totaled 1.6 percent of all federal outlays in 1995, or \$17 billion, and the states matched another \$12 billion), this did not prevent a concerted attack on the “excesses” of the “nanny state.”²⁷²

The Republicans and Reagan reached out to these struggling white voters by appealing to “traditional values” (traditionally “American,” but subliminally marketed as traditionally “white”). These values centered on a belief in hard work, and the importance of “family values” such as self-reliance and personal

²⁷¹ Weaver, 104.

²⁷² William M. Epstein, *Welfare in America: How Social Science Fails the Poor* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 22-23.

responsibility.²⁷³ For a large portion of the white working- and middle-class electorate (particularly those in the South and non-unionized workers in the North) having such values meant opposing the Democrats, who, by the logic of the conservative worldview, wanted to use “their” tax money to fund programs that benefit the “other.” Welfare, of course, as a means tested program, was viewed exactly in this way. As Martin Gilens’ critical work on public opinion and welfare argues, negative feelings about “welfare” were and are related to the perception of welfare as a program for African Americans and the misrepresentation in the media of most welfare recipients as black and undeserving teenage mothers.²⁷⁴ Gilens’ survey work demonstrated that the majority of Americans erroneously believe that African Americans are the primary recipients of welfare. Moreover, most survey respondents believed that welfare recipients will remain in permanent state of “dependence” because programs such as welfare have become a poverty “trap”²⁷⁵

Many reputable social scientists countered that the problem with AFDC wasn’t that it paid too much, but that work did not pay enough to cover the increased costs in childcare and loss of Medicaid benefits that single mothers with infants faced when they entered the workforce.²⁷⁶ The work of William Julius Wilson further demonstrated that the rise in unemployment of inner city African American men had

²⁷³ Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1992), 177.

²⁷⁴ Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁷⁵ Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 55.

²⁷⁶ Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997); Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

nothing to do with welfare policy, but with “work disappearing” due to the massive loss of well-paying industrial jobs in our inner cities from the late 1960s onwards.²⁷⁷

But perception, not reality, matters in politics; the conservative arguments about welfare successfully played upon racialized fears that desegregation and affirmative action were responsible for greater competition in an increasingly difficult labor market for less-educated whites, as well as increased competition for admission to elite universities and professional schools on the part of affluent whites. In part due to the popular image of welfare as a form of handout that primarily benefited the undeserving poor in America’s inner cities, Ronald Reagan was able to garner close to half of the votes of non-college educated whites.²⁷⁸

In reaction to the Democrats’ losing white working and lower-middle class voters from the Nixon era onwards, “Third Way” Democrats (led by the Democratic Leadership Council, of which Bill Clinton served as the first chair in the mid-1980s) moved the national party to the center on such issues. They shifted the party to bipartisan support for cuts to welfare programs that were purportedly – even according to many Democratic Party leaders – bloating the state, slowing economic growth, and perverting individual economic incentives for the poor.

The ensuing commitments of the predominant neoliberal wing of the Democratic Party to strict work requirements for welfare, harsh sentencing guidelines for federal drug crimes, and an abandonment of any post-Cold War “peace dividend” meant that the politics of “budget deficits” would drive the next twenty years of national political discourse. Not just AFDC, but all means-tested social safety

²⁷⁷ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

²⁷⁸ Weaver, 104; Edsall and Edsall, 172-73.

programs have suffered from a similar racialized “otherization,” even though whites constitute the largest racial group receiving benefits today from the means-tested programs of TANF, Head Start, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. Thus the “racialization” of means-tested programs contributed to hostility to all social welfare expenditure (or for “big government” in general), except programs that constituents view as being “individually paid for” – such as Social Security or Medicare. This broader hostility to government intrusion is why even modest proposals to raise taxes on the wealthy, expand public provision, and eliminate poverty gain little political traction, despite growing inequality and the highest child poverty rates among the advanced democracies.

By the Clinton era, the right had managed to create a new, predominant conception of “fair competition,” which emphasized not access to basic resources, but the work ethic. The most effective anti-poverty program would be the elimination of the welfare “handouts” that kept people dependent on the government and sapped them of the discipline that labor market competition would teach them.²⁷⁹ Competition and adversity were seen as virtues, while solidarity and public expenditure were viewed with suspicion. The American social philosophy of “rugged individualism” underpinned the neoliberal economic platform endorsed by the Republicans and later by New Democrats, which argued that a deregulated market economy could create equal opportunity and efficiently and fairly allocate resources.²⁸⁰ In the imagination of neoliberalism, society consists of individuals competing for rewards in an allegedly efficient and just market. Thus, whites, blacks

²⁷⁹ Edsall and Edsall, 184.

²⁸⁰ Edsall and Edsall, 178.

and Latinos were seen as equally responsible for securing their families' wellbeing through their employment status in the private labor market. According to this neoliberal logic, racial and gender discrimination had been remedied by the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, and if there were any structural forces impeding people from succeeding in the labor market (such as class or racial inequality), a meritocratic educational system would enable those from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply themselves and achieve upward mobility. This set of beliefs has weakened the already tenuous American moral commitment, strongest during the New Deal and Great Society, to "level-the-playing-field" through an expansive set of social rights; it has prepared the way for education reformers to advance equality of opportunity by creating urban schools that enable low-income children to compete fairly within the allegedly meritocratic system, playing on the American belief that social and economic inequality and equality of opportunity can coexist.

Poverty and radical inequality, we know, pose structural barriers to individual fulfillment. Tackling poverty and radical inequality head on will require a revived left that rejects this view and argues that only by expanding social provision of public goods can we create genuine equality of opportunity. But in taking that stance it may be most useful to introduce and defend the concept of democratic equality.

V. Inequality is the Common Enemy

i. Fair Equality of Opportunity

This chapter began by commenting on the reluctance of the American public to admit that dismantling radical inequality of outcomes would be required by a true commitment to "equality of fair opportunity." In *The New York Times* article that

chronicled Obama's shift from "inequality" to "opportunity," Jared Bernstein, a former economic adviser to Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., expressed his concerns that inequality was a divisive term: "I think the word 'inequality' means different things to different people. We always have inequality, and in America we're not that upset about inequality of outcomes. But we are upset about inequality of opportunity."²⁸¹ By contrast, in our neoliberal political era, "equality of opportunity" can mean very different things to different people. According to a recent statement by Republican House majority leader Republican Representative Paul Ryan, the poverty of our inner cities is primarily caused by "generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work."²⁸² This belief, a legacy of the post-Reagan shift in American politics, goes hand-in-hand with his own conservative and limited vision for "defending" equality of opportunity.

In order to provide fair equality of opportunity we will have to restrict the extent of inequality of outcomes. Those who critique radical democrats for their commitment to a "leveling down" of economic resources are partially correct; it is through redistribution from the "most successful" to "least successful" that a society equalizes access to basic resources (economic, social, and cultural) or what Rawls terms the "primary goods" needed for each individual to pursue their autonomously determined "life plans." As Michael Walzer writes in his essay, "In Defense of Equality," and develops further in *Spheres of Justice*, radical democrats recognize that justice is undermined when unequal material resources can be transformed into

²⁸¹ Calmes, "In Talk of Economy, Obama Turns to 'Opportunity' Over 'Inequality.'"

²⁸² Charles M. Blow, "Paul Ryan, Culture and Poverty," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2014, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/opinion/blow-paul-ryan-culture-and-poverty.html>.

other social goods, including educational opportunities. When this fungibility exists, we have what Walzer calls the “tyranny of money,” by which he means the ability for wealth to buy advantages in politics, healthcare, justice, education, or other “spheres” of life for either oneself or one’s offspring.²⁸³

Even truly equal funding per pupil for public education would not eliminate educational disparities based on parental background, since familial and cultural resources are easily fungible into school success, and peer composition of schools greatly affects the quality of the school experience. Money can purchase a place in a private school; it can also purchase SAT-prep courses; and it can purchase a seat in a college-preparatory summer camp.²⁸⁴ Wealth, often combined with skin color (given the persistence of racially discriminatory practices by private realtors to this day), “purchases” a certain school district and a certain class composition of that school district. There is an increasing rigidity of the American class system. Sociologist Sean Reardon’s recent research demonstrates the considerable advantages that the wealthy convey to their children in the competition for admission to selective higher education institutions, the gatekeepers for future entry into the professional-managerial elite:

The academic gap is widening because rich students are increasingly entering kindergarten much better prepared to succeed in school than middle-class students. This difference in preparation persists through elementary and high

²⁸³ Michael Walzer, “In Defense of Equality,” in *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 247. See also Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

²⁸⁴ Sean Reardon, “The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations,” in *Whither Opportunity*, ed. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 104-05. Reardon’s work suggests that it the increasing achievement gap between rich and poor has not been the result of rising income inequality per se, but that “the returns to income have grown [and] families may be changing how they invest in their children’s cognitive development.” Reardon writes: “The combination of the increasing importance of educational success in determining earnings and the increasing importance of test scores in defining educational success may have caused parents to focus more on their children’s cognitive development.”

school. My research suggests that one part of the explanation for this is rising income inequality. As you may have heard, the incomes of the rich have grown faster over the last 30 years than the incomes of the middle class and the poor. Money helps families provide cognitively stimulating experiences for their young children because it provides more stable home environments, more time for parents to read to their children, access to higher-quality child care and preschool and — in places like New York City, where 4-year-old children take tests to determine entry into gifted and talented programs — access to preschool test preparation tutors or the time to serve as tutors themselves.²⁸⁵

Walzer is correct in his contention that: “unlimited wealth threatens all the institutions and practices of civil society.”²⁸⁶ Reducing growing income inequality is a first step to reducing the tyranny of money in education.

But wealth is not the only resource that parents bestow upon their children, and thus democratic social policy aimed at creating fair equality of opportunity would have to go beyond simply achieving reductions in post-tax income inequality. Equally central to the academic success of children of highly educated parents are the study skills and verbal acuity that privileged parents pass on to their children, as well as the social capital that the advantaged possess. Social capital here entails all of the social connections and contacts parents possess, as well as the knowledge of how competitive selection processes, including college admissions and the job market, work. Unless schools provide high-quality social services and guidance counseling enabling disadvantaged children to acquire an approximation of the social capital that most affluent students receive from their families, fair equality of opportunity in schools will not be achieved. A democratic society must, to the greatest extent possible, make public all the advantages that the privileged convey through private means to their children. This means poor communities need high-quality pre-school

²⁸⁵ Reardon, “No Rich Child Left Behind.”

²⁸⁶ Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” *Political Theory* 12:3 (August 1984), 322.

programs, fully-funded breakfast and lunch programs, and creative and enriching after-school and summer-school programs – goods that the affluent take for granted. It means that disadvantaged schools need the best guidance counselors, so as to dismantle the pipeline from private schools and elite public high schools to the highly selective American universities and colleges that serve as gateways of access to the top tiers of the labor market and of political power. To scale up such efforts on a societal-wide basis will take considerable public expenditures, and will have to be financed at least in part through redistributive measures that alleviate inequality.

If we wish to implement Rawls's fair equality of opportunity, we must openly contend with and reject the vision that Ryan and others advance, and we must defend limitations on inequality. Once we recognize that limiting inequality is a part of our political project, and that to some extent therefore, we do believe in "equality of outcomes," the question becomes how we will make this vision a political reality. Some will contend that limitations will be brought about by a pragmatic politics that contends that fair competition can only be achieved when families have a basic income, as well as adequate access to healthcare, childcare, and neighborhood resources.

I contend, by contrast, that we must always couple our commitment to fair competition with a solidaristic conception of "democratic equality" that seeks to temper the tendency to view life as nothing more than a "race" for scarce goods and positions.²⁸⁷ We must justify the limitations on inequality not solely based on

²⁸⁷ Both John Schaar and Isaac Kramnick note that equality of opportunity envisions life as a "race." See: Isaac Kramnick, "Equal Opportunity and the Race of Life: Some Historical Reflections on Liberal Ideology," *Dissent Magazine*, 28 (1981), 178-187; and John H. Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity and

promoting fair competition, but on promoting a more just society in which all members, regardless of labor market outcome, have a decent and dignified life. The emphasis on competition shared by advocates of fair and formal equality of opportunity has allowed this political discourse to be subverted by conservatives, who have successfully argued that increased social provision of basic goods does not ensure equality of opportunity, but rather thwarts it. Conservatives will continue to make this claim. The left, by contrast, must openly defend the notion of democratic equality and of equal citizenship, which would provide the basic resources necessary to establish fair competition, but also make sure to provide a decent quality life for those who do not succeed in the race of life.

ii. *Democratic Equality*

John Rawls advances one of the most philosophically rigorous defenses of the concept of democratic equality. According to Rawls, we must go beyond ensuring that the least advantaged members of society have an equal chance to attain competitive economic and social positions, and aim for democratic equality as well. Rawls's "difference principle" holds that inequalities are only justified if they serve to improve the quality of life of members of the least advantaged group, which means that even those inequalities in life conditions that result from successful performance in a competitive educational system and labor market would have to be limited by public policy. Rawls's concept of democratic equality recognizes that "fair competition" does not necessarily result in just outcomes, because distributing scarce goods according to competitive labor market and educational competition can

Beyond," in *Equality*, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (New York: Atherton Press, 1967), 228-49.

disproportionately reward those who by happenstance “won” the natural lottery for scarce talents.

For Rawls and for others, equality of opportunity is problematic because it can result in great differences in labor market outcomes and thus social reward. As Rawls noted, “Equality of opportunity means an equal chance to leave the less fortunate behind in the personal quest for influence and social position.”²⁸⁸ Conservatives, as we have explored, will actually celebrate these inequalities in the name of equality of opportunity. British historian and public intellectual R.H. Tawney likens this notion of equality of opportunity to the “tadpole philosophy,” in which:

intelligent tadpoles reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly on to dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs.²⁸⁹

The tadpoles will not question the social distance that exists between the unsuccessful tadpoles and the successful frogs; the frogs will not remember their former class position and demand that all members of society, regardless of social class, live a dignified and civilized life. According to Tawney, a society that strictly adheres to the concept of equality of opportunity leads to the winners “denounc[ing] the failings of beggars with the expert knowledge of a professional mendicant” and preserves “the chasm which separated the elect from the mass of the population.”²⁹⁰

The educational system serves, in part, to sort individuals into the labor market and therefore into a social hierarchy. T.H. Marshall, champion of the welfare

²⁸⁸ Rawls, 106-107.

²⁸⁹ R.H. Tawney, *Equality* (Liverpool: Tinling and Co., 1964), 105.

²⁹⁰ Tawney, *Equality*, 105.

state, recognized that a commitment to democratic equality would always temper the inequality of outcomes that arise from the competitive educational and labor market institutions necessary to a modern, efficient society:

No [educational] authority can act on the principle that social circumstances must limit educational opportunity, but in fact they do, and the accepted methods of educational selection cannot wholly prevent this. The remedy lies in the reduction of ‘social distance.’²⁹¹

Marshall understood that the development of a more humane capitalism through the advent of the welfare state could not abolish all hierarchies, and especially not hierarchies based on meritocratic selection for jobs and offices. “Competitive selection through the educational system must remain with us to a considerable extent,” he wrote, if society is to train individuals for jobs that demand expertise and advanced training.²⁹² The tendency to grant both social decision-making power and great economic wealth to individuals based upon “merit” might have the “artificial consequence” of increasing “social distance.”²⁹³ Thus even if there were true equality of opportunity to gain admission to – and afford to attend – highly selective academic institutions, the power of such a meritocratic elite should be limited. In making his argument for equality, Marshall favors a strong set of social rights, a robust array of high quality, publicly and equitably financed social goods, in order to limit the economic and social power that educational and labor market success confers.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ T.H. Marshall, *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 276.

²⁹² Marshall, 277.

²⁹³ Marshall, 279.

²⁹⁴ Marshall, 278. Marshall was staunchly against a society in which only academic achievement could guarantee a dignified life: “The snobbery of the educational label, certificate or degree when, as often, the prestige of the title bears little or no relation to the value of the content, is a pernicious thing against which I should like to wage a major war.”

By contrast, in the “meritocratic society” that Rawls, Marshall, and Tawney reject, there comes to exist, as Rawls writes, “a marked disparity between the upper and lower classes in both means of life and the rights and privileges of organizational authority.”²⁹⁵ This can lead, as Michael Young’s classic work *The Rise of The Meritocracy*, to a society in which the winners of the meritocratic race for scarce positions deem themselves superior to the “losers.”²⁹⁶ More insidiously, it can lead to the “meritocrats” believing their success justifies their passing on their cultural and social advantages to their children.

The principle of democratic equality advanced by Rawls, Tawney, and Young not only demands fair competition for individuals, but also overall social well-being, particularly mutuality in relationships among individuals in society.²⁹⁷ John Schaar, writing many years before the rapid increase in American social inequality, argued that for democrats the problem with social and economic inequality is how it contributes to hierarchical attitudes within a supposed democratic community. Schaar argues that his commitment to democratic equality “is not some kind of leveling demand for equality of condition. It is no more than a recognition of the obvious fact that the great material inequality that prevails in American today produces too much brutishness, impotence, and rage among the lower classes, and too much nervous vulgarity among the middle classes.”²⁹⁸

The argument for democratic equality is based on a desire to create a just society that tempers the competitive aspects of life and ensures a decent quality of life

²⁹⁵ Rawls, 106.

²⁹⁶ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy: 1870 - 2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

²⁹⁷ Tawney, *Equality*, 114.

²⁹⁸ Schaar, 242.

for all. Democratic equality requires the robust provision of high quality public goods to all citizens, but not a commitment to strict equality of income and family resources, let alone a bland sameness of condition or personal character. Rather, a democratic egalitarian society promotes a sense of common membership so that all society's members benefit from the plurality of talents of its members, without degrading the quality of life and self-respect for any member of our shared community. R.H.

Tawney put it best in his treatise *Equality*:

No one thinks it inequitable that, when a reasonable provision has been made for all, exceptional responsibilities should be compensated by exceptional rewards, as a recognition of the service performed and an inducement to perform it... What is repulsive is not that one man should earn more than others, for where community of environment, and a common education and habit of life, have bred a common tradition of respect and consideration, these details of the counting-house are forgotten or ignored. It is that some classes should be excluded from the heritage of civilization which others enjoy, and that the fact of human fellowship, which is ultimate and profound, should be obscured by economic contrasts, which are trivial and superficial. What is important is not that all men should receive the same pecuniary income. It is that the surplus resources of society should be so husbanded and applied that it is a matter of minor significance whether they receive it or not.²⁹⁹

Democratic equality extends far beyond a concern for fair economic distribution, or as Tawney puts it, the “details of the counting-house.” This radical democratic concept maintains that regardless of labor market outcome, all members of society and their children should have access to those resources necessary for satisfying basic human needs, enabling individuals to lead a decent material, cultural, and civic existence. Finally, the vision of democratic quality is inextricably tied to a belief in equality of citizenship – a democratic vision which holds that each member of society

²⁹⁹ Tawney, *Equality*, 113.

should have equal democratic voice in constructing the institutions that govern their daily conduct (school, community, and workplace).³⁰⁰

VI. Unite the Egalitarians and Marginalize the Backward

Reintroducing the discourse of democratic equality into American politics will require the building of social movements committed to an empathetic solidarity with their fellow community members, regardless of race, gender, or class position. A politics of democratic equality necessitates that citizens generally embrace the idea that “there but for fortune” they and their offspring could occupy the position of the least advantaged members of society.

The left can (and should) appropriate the language of equality of opportunity (as Rawls does) to contend for more robust and equitable forms of universal public provision. But all normative concepts are open to contestation; the conservative vision of equality of opportunity stresses the “work ethic” and argues that regardless of initial social disadvantages, “deserving” members of society will succeed in the race for scarce social and economic positions. According to this view, poverty does not prevent an insurmountable structural barrier to equality of opportunity; any *industrious* individual can work their way up from the bottom. The danger of this ideology is not simply that it is empirically wrong (poverty does, in fact, limit the fulfillment of human potential); it also debases the value of those who do not succeed.

What about those who try and fail, regardless of their starting-gate position? As

³⁰⁰ Tawney, *Equality*, 197. Tawney contended that authority within the institutions of a democratic society must be based on the consent of the governed, not the force of the powerful: “[A]uthority, to justify its title, must rest on consent, that power is tolerable only so far as it is accountable to the public and that differences of character and capacity between human beings, however important on their own plane, are of minor significance compared with the capital fact of their common humanity. Its object is to extend the application of these principles from the sphere of civil and political rights, where at present, they are nominally recognized to that of economic and social organization, where they are systematically and insolently defied.”

Schaar put it in 1967, again prior to the conservative attack on the welfare state: “[Democratic equality] is blind to all questions of success or failure. This is the equality that obtains in the relations of members of any genuine community. It is the feeling held by each member that all other members, regardless of their many differences of function and rank, belong to the community ‘as fully as he does himself.’ Equal opportunity, far from strengthening this kind of equality, weakens it.”³⁰¹

There is more to life than the allegedly meritocratic race for a scarce number of well-remunerated social and economic positions. Poor and working-class children deserve safe and healthy communities, in addition to well-performing and well-financed schools because they deserve to experience the same care, nurturing, and physical security that their middle-class and wealthy peers receive across town. Defending this notion of democratic equality will be a challenge. Some will continue to stress fair competition. But we absolutely cannot continue to make pragmatic political use of the notion of equality of opportunity without committing ourselves to the reduction of inequality that fair equality of opportunity would entail. Ideally we will shift our political discourse so that we debate the respective merits of fair equality of opportunity and democratic equality, and marginalize the more formal vision put forward by conservatives such as Paul Ryan.

Marshall and Tawney wrote at a time in English history when the left was fighting against the continuation of aristocratic privilege in a society only beginning to commit itself to “equality of opportunity.” Indeed, equality of opportunity is “a

³⁰¹ Schaar, 245.

doctrine originally designed to serve the class interests of the talented ‘have-nots’ against the untalented ‘haves.’”³⁰² Thus it was Tawney who rallied against the existence of the “public” (or, in American English, “private”) school system: “To serve educational needs, without regard to the vulgar irrelevancies of class and income, is part of the teacher’s honor.”³⁰³ This sentiment is at the heart of American’s understanding of the value of public education. And it is, in some ways, similar to Michelle Rhee’s persistent claim that, “We, as educators, cannot be focused on the external factors” (though Rhee is not calling to abolish private schools).³⁰⁴ But Marshall and Tawney, in contrast to Rhee and other reformers, knew that true, fair equality of opportunity could only be realized if social hierarchies outside of the school were reduced, and they worried too much about the plight of the “losers” to not take the political leap to democratic equality. As the 21st-century United States continues to maintain radical inequalities of income and wealth, we must look back to Marshall, Tawney, and others for guidance.

The challenge for progressives is to make clear in public debate that we will need a major investment of federal, state and local funds necessary to revive decaying communities not just in our inner cities, but in impoverished rural areas as well. Hopefully we can transform our political debate and reject the bipartisan neoliberal hostility to expanding public provision and to enacting truly progressive tax rates on individuals and corporations. Robert Reich is right: we need to talk about inequality and we need to acknowledge not only that it prevents fair competition but also that it

³⁰² Kramnick, 184.

³⁰³ R.H. Tawney, “The Problem of the Public Schools,” in *The Radical Tradition: Twelve Essays on Politics, Education, and Literature* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1964), 69.

³⁰⁴ Rhee, *Radical*, 210.

is morally profane. If we cannot build a democratic politics that counters the austerity politics of our neoliberal age, we will continue to misattribute the causes of concentrated poverty, continue to accept inequality as “American,” and continue to claim incorrectly that the American education system has the power to restore the American Dream and create shared economic prosperity. Only a more humane political discourse that focuses upon distributive justice can dismantle our obsession with education as the solution to inequality and declining individual opportunity.

Conclusion

I. Education Reformers as the Product of Neoliberalism

This thesis contends that the education reform movement can be properly understood as a symptom of the post-Reagan, bipartisan, neoliberal shift in American politics. This rightward shift has engendered bipartisan political silence on the structural causes of poverty, inequality, mass incarceration, and the increasing social and economic stratification of American life that threatens the future of American democracy. In contrast to the greater political and economic equality that New Deal liberalism sought to create (though never achieved to the same extent that European social democracy did), the education reform movement is symptomatic of a broader neoliberal ideological consensus that argues that we must hold individuals accountable for their success and failure in our market society—despite the fact that more than ever individuals’ life opportunities are constrained by the social situation in which they are born. Education reform masquerades as a serious attempt to repair urban education and thus improve the opportunity for low income, urban students to succeed; but their market model calls for teacher and student accountability without demanding the social expenditure necessary to create conditions for fair competition. “We as a nation have already obtained any gains that might be garnered through high-stakes, test-centric teaching,” notes University of Colorado Boulder professor Kevin Welner. “In fact, high expectations become a punitive false promise if combined with low resources, low opportunities, and a lack of support.”³⁰⁵ Unfortunately, resources,

³⁰⁵ “Leading Educators Call for a New Direction for Education Reform, Focused on the Opportunity Gap,” National Education Policy Center, April 25, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://nepc.colorado.edu/newsletter/2013/04/leading-educators-call-new-direction-education-reform-focused-opportunity-gap>.

opportunities, and support are not our nation's priority according to the austerity politics embraced by today's politicians.³⁰⁶ Thus the reformers should primarily be blamed for neglecting the importance of "out of school factors" in determining student achievement; but if they wish to focus solely on school reform, then they are secondarily at fault for their failure to call for increased public investment in our low-income school districts. The education reform movement is representative of the revived conservative belief that structures do not constrain individual opportunities in the market, and that "big government" is inefficient.

The claim I advance in this thesis is not that education reformers are conspiratorially trying to cut public funding and advance austerity politics; rather, education reform has become the central means by which politicians can rhetorically commit themselves to creating equal opportunity, reducing inequality, and creating jobs, without actually engaging in the (more expensive and redistributive) measures necessary to address those problems. The problem with education reformers is not simply that they claim poverty is "no excuse" for low educational achievement (despite the work of Diane Ravitch, Richard Rothstein, and others showing how poverty does inhibit student performance); the problem is that in the context of austerity politics, education reform becomes the only terrain on which we discuss the inequalities of opportunity and of life outcomes that plague our stratified nation.

³⁰⁶ The education reform movement, of course, is not the first neoliberal effort to strive to decrease poverty by trimming government spending. By the Clinton era, the national leadership of both parties came to believe that poverty could be best tackled by increasing the participation of single mothers in the formal labor market – and ending "welfare as we knew it." While the expansion of the "earned income tax credit" helped some single parent working families escape poverty, the continued rapid growth of low-wage service jobs, combined with high unemployment rates among non-college educated residents of deindustrialized regions (both urban and rural) mean that the United States continues to be bedeviled by the highest official poverty rates in the advanced OECD countries, especially among children.

Education reform becomes so important because it purports to absolve society of its social ills, without threatening the status quo of inequality and poverty. We have yet to transform education reform into a more humane program that combines anti-poverty and social service measures with investments in community renewal. This failure has much to do with the fact that Americans understand education as the key to a meritocratic system that is not undermined by social inequalities.

If America seriously wishes to tackle the “crisis in education” we have to address the concentration of poverty that plagues the United States and hampers the performance of both inner city and rural school districts. In the United States nearly one-quarter of children grow up in poverty. We know that this negatively affects infants’ and toddlers’ preparation for schooling, as well as their academic performance once in the K-12 system. There is currently no political will to redress the substantively less equal life opportunities caused by the “toxic stress” that poor children face in their neighborhoods.³⁰⁷ As my thesis findings demonstrate, redressing such structural inequalities requires politically difficult efforts to integrate city school-districts with more affluent suburban districts, and/or major investments of federal and state funds to insure that all low-income schools provide the “wraparound” social services that would enrich the cultural experiences of low-income and working-class students. Investments in these neighborhoods must promote work that is sustainable and long term. It cannot be carried out as a “service project,” undertaken by inexperienced and temporary Teach For America volunteers, or by Match tutors in Boston, who work for eight dollars an hour plus a housing

³⁰⁷ Elaine Weiss, “The Toxic Toll of Child Poverty,” *Huffington Post*, October 1, 2012, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elaine-weiss/child-poverty_b_1929225.html.

stipend, and who serve only for 1-2 years before moving on to other careers.³⁰⁸

Finally, such reforms must maintain a focus on the structural causes of poverty; it cannot be done in the name of building “character” or “grit,” not so long as these buzzwords can be used to claim that poverty is the result of insufficient character or insufficient grit, rather than unjust social structures. Until we recognize that social inequality threatens educational performance, rather than believing that education provides a path around social inequality to equality of opportunity, we will continue to lose the battle for a humane education reform.

II. The Real Problems of American Society

Americans traditionally have tolerated fairly high levels of inequality if the promise of upward social mobility remained. Recent work by Raj Chetty and collaborators demonstrates that American social mobility rates have always been fairly low compared to other industrial nations. The real living standards of low-income families steadily rose from 1947-1973, thus delaying the need for political debate about low rates of social mobility. Since the late 1970s, however, real family income stagnated for the bottom half of American families.³⁰⁹ This has given rise to some mainstream politicians discussing how to restore social mobility.

³⁰⁸ James Vaznis, “Some Chafe at Charter School’s Low Pay for Tutors,” *The Boston Globe*, December 30, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/12/30/dispute-over-tutors-pay-roils-match-charter-school/Zo0iry9UCbKqPxDGtFYTxN/story.html>.

³⁰⁹ For a discussion of stagnating middle-class earnings see Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All*, 36. For the most recent comprehensive work on equality of opportunity see Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, and Turner, “Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility” As Chetty and his team notes: “We find that all of these rank-based measures of intergenerational mobility have not changed significantly over time. . . . Although rank-based measures of mobility remained stable, income inequality increased over time in our sample, consistent with prior work. Hence, the consequences of the “birth lottery” – the parents to whom a child is born – are larger today than in the past.” See also: James Surowiecki, “The Mobility Myth,” *The New Yorker*, March 3, 2014, accessed April 6, 2014,

Unfortunately, we are severely limited by a political discourse that claims that the world's wealthiest country and number one military spender cannot find the money to eliminate even child poverty. Allegedly "liberal" pundits such as Thomas Friedman or Fareed Zakaria tell us that Occupy Wall Street was misguided in questioning inequality and that expanding educational opportunities will allow us to restore social mobility.³¹⁰ Their continued exhortation that social mobility and inequality can coexist reinforces a bipartisan politics of "fiscal responsibility"; only the fairly isolated Congressional Progressive Caucus rallies against this assumption. Combatting the politics of fiscal austerity must be at the heart of struggles to create a more humane public discourse on inequality and on education. As Cornel West noted in an interview following the release of his 2012 book *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*: "We've got a political system that's broke..., [with] both parties tied to big money.... Most importantly we need a massive job program. We need an investment in education, quality jobs, and housing. Do away with discourse about austerity, [and] focus on massive investment, research and development, infrastructure, and job creation."³¹¹

Poverty, inequality, unemployment, and underemployment are injustices that cannot be addressed by reforming the education system so as to provide some lucky individuals "a way out" of these problems. The evidence examined in Chapter Three

http://www.newyorker.com/talk/financial/2014/03/03/140303ta_talk_surowiecki. There Chetty notes: "Social mobility is low and has been for at least thirty or forty years."

³¹⁰ Fareed Zakaria, "Fix Education, Restore Social Mobility," *CNN*, November 6, 2011, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/11/06/zakaria-fix-education-restore-social-mobility/>.

³¹¹ Leigh Ann Caldwell, "Cornel West and Tavis Smiley: Poverty in America Threatens Democracy," *CBS News*, April 22, 2012, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cornel-west-and-tavis-smiley-poverty-in-america-threatens-democracy/>. See also Cornel West and Tavis Smiley, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (New York: Smiley Books, 2012).

makes clear that we must reject the notion that inequality is the result of America's educational system not keeping pace with the demand for higher educated workers created by skill biased technological change. Technological change may create some high-paying STEM jobs, but it will also continue to eliminate many more jobs that formerly brought families into the middle class. As a society, we could find in the near future that there are not enough "good jobs" to go around even for the highly educated. The evidence also rejects the notion that unemployment and underemployment is the result of a "skills mismatch." Education can be a part of our effort to reduce inequality, but we must couple this with job creation, broadly shared economic growth, and policies that restore the balance between the rich and poor that existed before the neoliberal shift in American politics. Ultimately we must stop putting education at the center of how Americans, if they are sufficiently virtuous, can avoid poverty and joblessness, and start focusing on what type of social setting allows individuals to take advantage of education and other life opportunities.

There is little doubt that we are experiencing high levels of unemployment and a shortfall in aggregate demand. With real interest rates at an all time low, Cornel West is correct to call for massive public funding for infrastructure, green technology, and advanced manufacturing, investments that might incentivize the private sector to increase investment its own role in these areas. But technological advances have made the economy more productive; the labor market has shifted, and increasing the educational attainment of our citizenry will not change the fact that there may not exist a sufficient numbers of high-wage, solidly middle class jobs necessary to recreate the levels of (in)equality that existed under New Deal liberalism.

This does not mean that we should accept the future as “hyper-meritocratic,” and that those who win the race of life shall win big, and those who lose shall be relegated to poverty. This may be the vision that some on the right in this country will continue to put forward. If we wish to fight against such a society, we will have to continue to look for new ways to address inequality of income and wealth. Inegalitarian labor market outcomes will not preclude our wealthy society from redistributing the rewards of technological advance and productivity. If the “knowledge-economy” of the 21st century does eliminate middle-class jobs and create a divide between the twenty percent who are employed in “symbolic manipulation,” knowledge creation, and mid-to-upper level management, and, on the other hand, a large service sector that provides goods and services to this affluent quintile, then redistributive tax policies and universal social provision may be needed to limit growing inequality. Inequality is not inevitable; it is a political and social choice. But, again, realizing such distributive policies will demand a restructuring of how we think about the chance to attain a decent life; we cannot continue the hyper-meritocratic view that only by proper educational and labor market achievement does one deserve to be well-off. If we continue with that logic, and fail to address the underlying causes of inequality, more and more Americans will continue to slide into economic insecurity and poverty.

III. The Challenge We Face

Ideally we would eradicate the radical inequality of labor market outcomes by raising the wages of most workers, in particular the wages of “low skilled” workers in the “service sector,” universalizing social provision for necessary goods such as child

care and early education, and expanding, not reducing the benefits and the reach of Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security. Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens argue in *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State* that countries with more generous levels of universal social provision tend to have a more favorable view of social welfare programs overall. Thus, in most of the Nordic countries social welfare programs, including universal healthcare and daycare, as well as generous paid parental leave, enjoy broad support, and these programs mean there is less backlash against the higher levels of progressive taxation needed to fund such programs. By making social welfare programs more universal, the United States could avoid class and racial tensions that lead to social provision's retrenchment.³¹²

Some of the Great Society anti-poverty programs, including Food Stamps, Medicaid, and a radically expanded AFDC, found themselves subject to a politics of backlash because they were means-tested, and so resented by families who earned just enough not to be eligible for their benefits.³¹³ Unfortunately, austerity politics have become scarier yet; at a time when half of American workers do not have any private pension benefits, we are debating cutting back the real value of Social Security, a universal program once thought to be “the third rail of American politics” for any politician who proposed cutting it.

We are still fighting an uphill battle and will have to continue to fight for some time on turf defined by a center-right consensus. Thus there is an argument for

³¹² Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens, *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State: Parties and Policies in Global Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³¹³ Nancy Folbre, “The Resentment Zone: Losing Means-Tested Benefits,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2010, accessed March 26, 2014, http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/22/the-resentment-zone-losing-means-tested-benefits/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0; Harold L. Wilensky, *Rich Democracies: Political Economy, Public Policy, and Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 325-27; Huber and Stephens, *Development and Crisis*.

taking a strategic approach that would attempt to reinvigorate the War on Poverty by pushing education reform to the left; this would be done, for example by fighting for the expansion of the few pilot “Promise Zones” and by fully funding them. We should demand that all low-income students have a quality school to attend and that they have access to health care, dental care, comprehensive social services, and that their parents have the resources and community supports to care for their children. We have known for years that poverty threatens student achievement, and that the race of life has been rigged for the least advantaged among us. Unfortunately, empirical reality does not engender political will.

IV. Suspicions of Education Reform Going Forward

Given what I have argued in this thesis, I do not believe education is the political terrain on which we will create the “fair equality of opportunity” that reformers claim to desire. Rather than demanding the funds it would take to scale-up the Promise Zones and bring them into all of America’s urban centers, education reformers seem comfortable waging a moralistic call to abolish teacher tenure and institute merit pay based on standardized test outcomes. One can debate the best ways to improve the quality of urban teachers; even some teachers’ unions are now open to forms of merit pay and to limitations on teacher tenure.³¹⁴ But only a broader, more comprehensive, and more socially conscious education reform effort can contribute to creating fair equality of opportunity in America.

³¹⁴ Vicki Phillips and Randi Weingarten, “Six Steps to Effective Teacher Development and Evaluation,” *The New Republic*, March 25, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112746/gates-foundation-sponsored-effective-teaching>

My suspicion of the education reformers going forward stems from a historical understanding that social change that benefits ordinary and working people comes about only when social movements emerge to pressure elites to create such change.³¹⁵ I would be surprised if the corporate and foundation-funded education reform movement makes a radical U-turn and begins to devote the same energy to advocating programs aimed at eliminating child poverty that it has to expanding charter schools and to limiting the power of teachers unions. Thus far, the reformers' defense of equal opportunity through more effective instruction and improved teacher quality has not demanded redistribution of resources from America's elite to disadvantaged neighborhoods. Even President Obama's proposed Promise Neighborhoods failed to receive the public funding that he called for, due to our austerity-driven budgetary politics.³¹⁶ This very failure has enabled both moderate Democratic and Republican political entrepreneurs to champion education reform, and to unite the most conservative and liberal of corporate foundation moguls. Where else can we witness a "united front" between the Walton Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation? Neither wing of corporate-philanthropy is calling for the expansion of those social goods necessary for the realization of fair equality of opportunity – and for the alteration of our tax structure necessary to fund them. When education reform makes such calls, it will not be due to the goodwill of the reformers,

³¹⁵ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

³¹⁶ "No Promise Neighborhood Grant Application This Year," Promise Neighborhoods Institute, May 23, 2013, accessed April 6, 2014, <http://blog.promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org/no-promise-neighborhoods-grant-application-this-year/>. Again, under austerity politics this funding will continue to dwindle, I suspect: "The U.S. Department of Education announced that due to the amount of funding made available under the FY 2013 continuing resolution it will be unable to hold a grant competition for the Promise Neighborhoods program this year. Communities with implementation grants from FY 2011 and FY 2012 will continue to receive funding; however, no new grants will be awarded in FY 2013."

or to data showing us that poverty hampers individual performance. It will be because those due to benefit from the expansion of such social provision have fought for and demanded those goods.

The deeper problem is that education reform has come to speak to issues on which American politics is otherwise tongue-tied. While current education reformers should be more sensitive to the challenges that poverty and inequality pose to student performance, individuals passionate about school reform will exist even in a more democratic and just society. In other words, there will always be individuals who wish to focus their attention on improving the teaching profession and on effective curricular reform, rather than on addressing poverty and joblessness. One would hope that teachers – and the communities that schools serve should be viewed as partners in such efforts rather than as adversaries. But we cannot blame the education reformers for our broader political crisis, just as we cannot blame education for not absolving society of poverty and inequality. Desire for education reform is currently displacing discussions of inequality and poverty, rather than provoking them. But only social movements from below, such as the nascent low-wage justice movement and a revived democratic labor movement, can shift the public discourse by demanding redistributive policies and a new War on Poverty that would move us towards equality of citizenship. Such a politics could serve to reintroduce the politics of “democratic equality” into mainstream American culture. The political will to eliminate poverty cannot come simply from a desire to create a “fair race of life.” Conservatives successfully claim that the fair race will be achieved through hard work, character, and grit, without questioning the structural constraints that prevent

the realization of those traits in disadvantaged youth. If we are serious about achieving substantive or “fair equality of opportunity,” we must openly demand reductions in inequality and poverty. And we must denounce unnecessary forms of inequality and embrace fairness.

Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood the predominant role for the redistribution of economic, as well as political, power in the fight for social justice. In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, King concluded with a call for a guaranteed income: “We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished.”³¹⁷ In arguing for a guaranteed income, King insisted that poverty is at its core an issue of individuals, families, and communities not having the basic resources to develop their human potential. Poverty is not inevitable because of the rigors of global competition or technological changes to the labor market. The existence of much lower poverty rates in the Northern European social market economies demonstrates that we can at least significantly ameliorate poverty without threatening the “incentivizing” market forces necessary to promote productivity and economic efficiency. There are equally prosperous developed nations where the ratio between average CEO compensation and their average employee is 80:1 or 90:1 rather than the stratospheric 350:1 found in the United States.³¹⁸

³¹⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 170-71.

³¹⁸ “CEO-to-Worker Pay Ratios Around the World,” AFL-CIO, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.aflcio.org/Corporate-Watch/CEO-Pay-and-You/CEO-to-Worker-Pay-Gap-in-the-United-States/Pay-Gaps-in-the-World>.

V. Education: More Than Competition

Finally, the mainstream public policy obsession with education as a vehicle for equality of opportunity and broadly shared economic prosperity has also served to marginalize discussion as to the moral purpose of public education in a democratic society. In humane social-market capitalism, education will always have a partly economic or instrumental purpose. Society has a responsibility to its citizens to provide them with the skills to find gainful employment (though, as I have mentioned, such gainful employment may not be available to all). But is not a major purpose of a common, public education to create a space in which society nurtures future citizens so they can participate in our common democratic project? What has happened to the conception of public education as the space in which we give all future citizens the basic critical thinking skills to navigate not only the economy but also the political sphere? As Diane Ravitch writes:

Our communities created public schools to develop citizens and to sustain our democracy. That is their abiding purpose. This unique institution has the unique responsibility of developing a citizenry, making many peoples into one people, and teaching our children the skills they need to prepare for work and continue their education.³¹⁹

We may be reviving some commitment to the importance of teaching “non-cognitive traits” in Paul Tough’s recent work *How Children Succeed*. But let us not forget that the ability to develop grit, curiosity, political awareness, and broader human potential, is largely conditioned by structural, material reality. A commitment to educating for character and democratic citizenship must be tied to a commitment to eliminate poverty.

³¹⁹ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 324.

If there is no majoritarian political commitment to public schools as truly valuable public goods – as more than just transmission belts to the job market – the wealthy will continue to opt out of the system, and/or be less willing to fund it publicly. As our economic and political system becomes increasingly stratified, the wealthy do not have an incentive to defend public education seriously. A study from Andrea Ichino, Loukas Karabarbounis, and Enrico Moretti, found that public spending on education was higher in countries (such as Sweden and Denmark) where levels of political participation were similar across income groups; in more stratified nations (such as Britain and the United States) where the rich dominate the political process, spending was lower.³²⁰

The expansion of charter schools poses a major challenge to this conception of public education. While there has been some public resistance in urban communities to their expansion, they are likely here to stay, particularly since the minority that are successful have considerable loyalty from the engaged urban parents who enroll their children. But as in Scandinavia, they could be subject to forms of democratic regulation that enforce certain basic standards with regard to teachers' pay, benefits, and working conditions. Emerging coalitions of teachers and parents in Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and Los Angeles are beginning to push back against the reformers by demanding that they support enhanced state and local funding for schools. Education reformers cannot claim to increase the dignity and respect that the teaching profession receives and continue to support major cuts in

³²⁰ Andrea Ichino, Loukas Karabarbounis, and Enrico Moretti, "The Political Economy of Intergenerational Income Mobility," *Economic Inquiry* 49:1 (January 2011), 47-69.

funding for urban education.³²¹ These political coalitions of teachers, parents, and community activists may be able to weaken the more punitive neoliberal aspects of “education reform” by demanding that educational policy-makers support schools as “community centers.” But to achieve any aspects of this progressive education reform agenda will mean increasing funding especially for our most disadvantaged districts.

In the end, if we wish to overcome our obsession with education reform correcting society’s inequities, we must recognize the role of structural disadvantage and revive social policy – and social movements – that tackle poverty, inequality, and joblessness head-on. If “education” is to engage with these problems, such education reform will have to be a mix of anti-poverty programs, social services, and community renewal. Calling today’s education reform movement the “civil rights movement of our era” distracts public attention from thinking seriously about how to deal with poverty and inequality.

The criticism of American political and policy discourse undertaken in this thesis is not a sufficient means to construct a more democratic and egalitarian United States. If social change could be achieved by political discourse alone, Paul Krugman’s *New York Times* column would not be a Sisyphean effort to alter the thinking of policy-makers and politicians inside the Beltway. Community coalitions fighting for equitable education and housing policies, in conjunction with the low-wage justice, immigrants’ rights, and a struggling labor movement, have begun to elect left-of-center mayors in Seattle, Los Angeles, and New York City. These are the types of democratic coalitions that can help elect progressives to office, and thereby

³²¹ Valerie Strauss, “A New ‘No-Excuses’ School Reform Mantra,” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2013, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/10/31/a-new-no-excuses-school-reform-mantra/>.

push moderate Democrats, and perhaps even some Republicans to the left. Inequality and poverty pervade American life. Education reform cannot continue to allow us to avoid examining the deeper causes of inequalities of opportunity and life outcomes. All Americans deserve and can have a dignified life free from poverty and insecurity. And all Americans, regardless of whether they win or lose the race of life for scarce “good jobs” or scarce places at elite universities and colleges, deserve equal citizenship and mutual respect. Education reform can play a limited role in improving the life opportunities of the least advantaged among us. It will take a revival of democratic social movements, working alongside policy intellectuals committed to democratic values, if we are to create a more just and humane United States.

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