

CONSUMING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT. In this essay David Labaree examines the tension between two competing visions of the purposes of education that have shaped American public schools. From one perspective, we have seen schooling as a way to preserve and promote public aims, such as keeping the faith, shoring up the republic, or promoting economic growth. From the other perspective, we have seen schooling as a way to advance the interests of individual educational consumers in the pursuit of social access and social advantage. In the first half of the essay Labaree shows the evolution of the public vision over time, from an emphasis on religious aims to political ones to economic ones and, finally, to an embrace of individual opportunity. In the second half, he shows how the consumerist vision of schooling has not only come to dominate in the rhetoric of school reform but also in shaping the structure of the school system.

In the course of the last 400 years, the tension between two competing visions of the purposes of education has shaped American public schools.¹ From one perspective, we have seen schooling as a way to preserve and promote public aims, such as keeping the faith, shoring up the republic, or promoting economic growth. From the other perspective, we have seen schooling as a way to advance the interests of individual educational consumers in the pursuit of social access and social advantage. This essay explores the evolution of that tension across the history of American schools.

I begin this account by tracing the emergence of this tension in the colonial period. Then in the first half of the essay, I explore the evolution of the public vision of education during the course of American history through the rhetoric of the country's most significant school reform movements. Here I argue that over time the public mission of American schools shifted from keeping the faith, to preserving the republic, to stimulating the economy, and finally to promoting social opportunity. In the second half of the essay, I examine the impact that the private vision — expressed through consumer demand — had in reshaping the structure of the school system across the same period of time. In this context, I argue that educational consumers have long expressed a consistent preference (through their enrollment choices and their votes) for a school system that was less focused on producing benefits for the community as a whole than on providing selective benefits to the students who earned its diplomas. Families have been willing to acknowledge that the system should provide educational access for other people's children, but only as long as it also has provided educational advantage for their own. This consumerism has been a factor in shaping schools from the

1. The argument in this essay is drawn from David Labaree, *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010). Adapted by permission.

beginning, but during the second half of the twentieth century, it also came to reshape the public vision of education around the consumerist principle of equal individual opportunity.

THE CORE TENSION BETWEEN PUBLIC AIMS AND PRIVATE INTERESTS IN SCHOOLING

At the very beginning of schooling in the American colonies, a tension arose between two different visions of the purposes of education, and this tension has been with us ever since. First, let us examine the origins of this tension in the colonial period.

COLONIAL SCHOOLING: PRESERVING THE FAITH

At the heart of the push for schooling in colonial America was a profoundly conservative vision of education's public mission: to preserve the religious community and maintain the faith. The language of the 1647 Massachusetts law that mandated schooling vividly makes this argument for education:

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times by persuading from the use of tongues, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded by false glosses of saint seeming deceivers, that learning may not be buried in the grave of our fathers in the church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors, —

It is therefore ordered, that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read.²

Thus only through education could congregants acquire “the true sense and meaning” of the Bible and thereby save themselves from the “false glosses of saint seeming deceivers.” Such a mission was too important to be left to chance or to the option of individual parents. Instead it required action by public authority to make schooling happen.

At the same time that the official rationale for communities to provide education in colonial America was proclaimed to be the pursuit of a religious ideal, another more pragmatic reason quietly emerged that pushed individuals to seek education on their own. In order to engage in commerce, people needed to be reasonably good at reading, writing, and arithmetic. Without these skills, storekeepers and merchants and tradesmen and clerks would be unable to make contracts, correspond with customers, or keep accounts. From this angle, schooling was a practical necessity for anyone who hoped to make a living by means of commercial activity in a country where, from the beginning, trade was a central fact of life.

2. Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1983* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 181.

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AN EMERGING PATTERN

So before there was an American system of education — before there was even an American nation — schooling in America was an important and growing component of ordinary life, and it educated a larger share of the populace than did schooling in the rest of the world.³ The two factors that propelled this growth of schooling, however, were quite different in character. From the view of religion, schooling was the pursuit of a high ideal, a way to keep the faith and promote piety. Religion gave schooling a public rationale that was explicit, openly expounded by preachers, political leaders, journalists, and parents. From the view of commerce, schooling was the pursuit of a mundane interest, a way to make a living in an increasingly trade-oriented economy. This rationale for schooling was well understood but only rarely made explicit. The prevailing religious rhetoric about education, backed by the full authority of scripture, made it difficult for anyone to argue the case in public for schooling as a way to get ahead financially, since to do so would seem at best unworthy and at worst irreligious. And the two factors differed not only in the goal they set for schooling but also in the agents who would carry out this goal. Whereas the religious view stimulated top-down efforts by government and the church to promote and provide education for the populace, the commercial view stimulated bottom-up efforts by individual consumers to pursue education for their own ends.

From the colonial period to the present, the economic rationale for schooling in the United States has gradually grown in intensity, and in the twentieth century it became increasingly explicit as a primary goal for education. Meanwhile the religious rationale for schooling has gradually faded into the background, giving way to more secular educational goals. During this entire time, however, the pressures that have sought to shape educational change in the United States have continually taken the form of these two early impulses to provide and pursue schooling.

The history of American education is in many ways an expression of this ongoing tension between schooling as the pursuit of gradually evolving cultural ideals and schooling as the pursuit of increasingly compelling economic practicalities. The first of these rationales has propelled most educational reform movements, which have demanded that schools adapt themselves to new ideals and help society realize these ideals — whether this ideal be religious faith, civic virtue, economic efficiency, racial equality, or individual liberty. These ideals have formed the core of the rhetoric of the major school reform movements.

The second rationale is what has propelled individuals to demand educational opportunity and to avail themselves of it when it is made available. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, however, this second form of pressure for educational change flew under the radar for the most part; this is evidenced by the fact that it is largely missing from the language of reform documents and educational

3. Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry in the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: Norton, 1974).

politics. Still, while the first approach has set waves of reform episodically rolling across the surface of education, the second has been the source of a steady current of incremental change flowing beneath the surface. As David Tyack and Larry Cuban point out in their influential essay on American schooling, the history of school reform in this country has been an odd mix of turbulent reform rhetoric, which has only modestly affected the underlying structure of schooling, and a slow and silent evolutionary process, which has exerted substantial change in this structure over a sufficiently long period of time that this change is barely visible.⁴

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC VISION OF SCHOOLING: FROM FAITH TO CITIZENSHIP TO ECONOMIC GROWTH TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Reform visions of schooling have long promoted education as a public good, but the definition of the public vision has shifted over time. What started as a purely religious argument turned into a secular political argument, then a pragmatic economic argument, and finally an individual access argument. The consumer interest in schooling as a private good was there from the beginning, but by the end of this period it had worked its way into the heart of the public vision of education. Let us examine briefly how this change played out in the rhetoric of the major movements for American school reform. What follows is not intended as a history of school reform; it is far too selective and cryptic for that. Instead it is a sketch of major trends in the evolution of the public vision of education as viewed through the lens of school reform documents.

COMMON SCHOOL MOVEMENT: CITIZENSHIP

As secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Public Education in the 1840s, Horace Mann became the most effective champion of the American common school movement, which established the American public school system in the years before the Civil War. Mann's *Twelfth Annual Report*, published in 1848, provided a comprehensive summary of the argument for the common schools. In it he made clear that the primary rationale for this institution was political: to create citizens with the knowledge, skills, and public spirit required to maintain a republic and to protect it from the sources of faction, class, and self-interest that pose the primary threat to its existence. After exploring the dangers that the rapidly expanding market economy posed to the fabric of republican community by introducing class conflict, he proclaimed:

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance-wheel of the social machinery. . . . The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society.⁵

4. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: Reflections on a Century of School Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

5. Quoted in Lawrence A. Cremin, ed., *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), 87.

A few pages later, Mann summed up his argument with the famous statement, "It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion."⁶ In his view, then, the common school system was given the centrally important political task of making citizens for a republic. And toward this end, its greatest contribution was its commonness, drawing together all members of society into a single institution and providing them with the shared educational experience and civic grounding that they needed in order to function as members of a functional republican community. For the common school movement, all other goals were subordinate to this one.

PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT: SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

The progressive education movement arrived on the scene in the United States at the start of the twentieth century. Pedagogical progressives such as John Dewey and William Kilpatrick argued for child-centered pedagogy, discovery learning, and student engagement, while the dominant strand of progressive reformers (that is, administrative progressives) such as Edward Thorndike and Ellwood Cubberley argued for social efficiency and preparing students for their future social roles.⁷ In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education issued a report to the National Education Association titled *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, which spelled out the administrative progressive position on education more clearly and consequentially than any other single document. The report announced at the very beginning that secondary schools need to change in response to changes in society, which "call for a degree of intelligence and efficiency on the part of every citizen that can not be secured through elementary education alone, or even through secondary education unless the scope of that education is broadened."⁸ According to the authors, schools exist to help individuals adapt to the needs of society; as society becomes more complex, schools must transform themselves accordingly; and in this way they will help citizens develop the socially necessary qualities of "intelligence and efficiency."

This focus on social efficiency, however, did not deter the authors from drawing on political rhetoric to support their position. In a 12,000-word report, they used the terms "democracy" or "democratic" no fewer than forty times. But what did they mean by democratic education? At one point in boldfaced type they state that "education in a democracy, both within and without the school, should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he will find his place and use that place to shape both

6. *Ibid.*, 92.

7. The terms administrative and pedagogical progressives come from David Tyack, *The One Best System* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974).

8. Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, *Bulletin* no. 35, U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Education (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1918), 1.

himself and society toward ever nobler ends."⁹ So, whereas Mann's reports used political arguments to support a primarily political purpose for schooling (preparing citizens with civic virtue), the commission's report used political arguments about the requirements of democracy to support a vision of schooling that was primarily economic (preparing efficient workers). In addition, the report preserved the concern of common school proponents about school as a public good, but only by redefining the public good in economic terms. Yes, education serves the interests of society as a whole, said these progressives; but it does so not by producing civic virtue but by producing what we would later come to call human capital.

DESEGREGATION MOVEMENT: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

If the administrative progressive movement marginalized the political argument for education, using it as window dressing for a vision of education as a way to create productive workers, the civil rights movement brought politics back to the center of the debate about schools — but now in a form that drew largely from consumerism. In the 1954 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, Chief Justice Earl Warren, speaking for a unanimous court, made a forceful political argument for the need to desegregate American schools.¹⁰ The key question the opinion asked and answered was this: "Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does."

The Court's reasoning moved through two main steps in reaching this conclusion. First, Warren argued that the social meaning of education had changed dramatically in the ninety years since the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the years after the Civil War, "the curriculum was usually rudimentary; ungraded schools were common in rural areas; the school term was but three months a year in many states; and compulsory school attendance was virtually unknown." As a result, education was not seen as an essential right of any citizen; but that had now changed:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . [I]t is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

This led to the second part of the argument: "Segregation with the sanction of law . . . has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system." In combination, these two

9. *Ibid.*, 3.

10. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

arguments — education is an essential right and segregated education is inherently harmful — led Warren to his conclusion:

We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs . . . are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

The argument in this decision was at heart political, asserting that education is a constitutional right of every citizen that must be granted to everyone on equal terms. But note that the political vision in *Brown* is quite different from the political vision put forward by Mann. For the common school movement, schools were critically important in the effort to build a republic; their *purpose* was political. But for the desegregation movement, schools were critically important as a mechanism of social opportunity. Their purpose was to promote social mobility. Politics was just the means by which one could demand access to this attractive educational commodity. In this sense, then, *Brown* depicted education as a private good, whose benefits go to the degree holder and not to society as a whole. The Court's argument was not that granting African Americans access to equal education would enhance society, both black and white; instead, it argued that African Americans were suffering from segregation and would benefit from desegregation.¹¹ Quality education was an important form of property that they had been denied, and the remedy was to give them access to it. In this decision, republican equality for citizens had turned into equal opportunity for consumers.

STANDARDS MOVEMENT: SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

In 1983, the National Commission for Excellence in Education produced a report titled *A Nation at Risk*, which helped turn the emerging standards effort into a national reform movement. The report got off to a fast start, issuing a dire warning about how bad things were and how important it was to reform the educational system:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . . [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.¹²

This passage set the tone for the rest of the report. It asserted a vision of education as an intensely public good: All Americans benefit from its successes, and all are threatened by its failures. The nation is at risk.

But the report represented education as a particular type of public good, which benefited American society by giving it the human capital it needed in order to be economically competitive with other nations:

11. Large numbers of middle-class white families interpreted the principle the same way. When the courts later moved to enforce desegregation through mandatory busing, these families moved out of the jurisdiction in order to avoid having black opportunity come at the expense of white advantage.

12. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983), 7.

We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.¹³

The risk to the nation posed here was primarily economic, and the main role that education could play in alleviating this risk was to develop a more efficient mechanism for turning students into productive workers. In parallel with the argument in *Cardinal Principles, A Nation at Risk* asserted that the issue of wealth production was the most important motive in seeking higher educational standards.

SCHOOL CHOICE MOVEMENT: CONSUMERISM AND SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

The school choice movement had its roots in the work of Milton Friedman, who devoted a chapter to the subject in his 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom*.¹⁴ But the movement really took off as a significant reform effort in the 1990s, and a major text that shaped the policy discourse of this movement was a 1990 book by John Chubb and Terry Moe — *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. The argument they raised in favor of school choice consisted of two key elements. First, they used the scholarly literature on school effectiveness to argue that schools are most effective at promoting student learning when they have the greatest degree of autonomy in administration, teaching, and curriculum. Second, they argued that democratic governance of school systems necessarily leads to bureaucratic control of schools, which radically limits autonomy; whereas market-based governance, based on empowering educational consumers instead of empowering the state, leads to more school autonomy. As a result, they concluded, we need to shift from democratic to market control of schooling in order to make schools more educationally effective.

Chubb and Moe welcomed the fact that, by shifting control from a democratic polity to the educational consumer, the proposed school choice system would change education from a public good to a private good:

Under a system of democratic control, the public schools are governed by an enormous, far-flung constituency in which the interests of parents and students carry no special status or weight. When markets prevail, parents and students are thrust onto center stage, along with the owners and staff of schools; most of the rest of society plays a distinctly secondary role, limited for the most part to setting the framework within which educational choices get made.¹⁵

In this way, then, the rhetoric of the school choice movement at the close of the twentieth century represented the opposite end of the scale from the rhetoric of the common school movement that set in motion the American public school system in middle of the nineteenth century. In educational reform rhetoric, we

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

15. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1990), 35.

have moved all the way from a political rationale for education to a market rationale, and from seeing education as a public good to seeing it as a private good. Instead of extolling the benefits of having a common school system promote a single virtuous republican community, reformers were extolling the benefits of having an atomized school system serve the differential needs of a vast array of disparate consumer subcultures.

INCORPORATING THE POLITICS OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

The start of the twenty-first century saw an interesting shift in the rhetoric of the standards movement and the choice movement, as both incorporated the language of equal opportunity from the civil rights movement. In their original form, both movements ran into significant limitations in their ability to draw support, and both turned to a very effective political argument from the civil rights movement to add passion and breadth to their mode of appeal.

THE NEW STANDARDS MOVEMENT. In January 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law a wide-reaching piece of standards legislation passed with broad bipartisan support. The title of this law explains the rhetorical shift involved in gaining approval for it: the No Child Left Behind Act.¹⁶ Listen to the language in the opening section of this act, which constitutes the most powerful accomplishment of the school standards movement: "The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments." This end would be accomplished by aligning education "with challenging State academic standards," "meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation's highest-poverty schools," "closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children," "holding schools accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students," "targeting . . . schools where needs are greatest," and "using State assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging State academic achievement and content standards."

What we find here is a marriage of the standards movement and the civil rights movement. From the former comes the focus on rigorous academic subjects, core curriculum for all students, and testing and accountability; from the latter comes the urgent call to reduce social inequality by increasing educational opportunity. The opening sentence captures both elements succinctly.

THE NEW CHOICE MOVEMENT. In the late 1990s, the politics of school choice became more robust with the introduction of a new approach to the choice movement's rhetorical repertoire. A 2005 book by Julian Betts and Tom Loveless, *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Educational Policy*, reflected the change. Choice could now be presented as a way to spread social opportunity to the disadvantaged:

16. *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (HR 1, 107th Cong., P.L. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, January 8, 2002).

Indeed, the question of school choice is not an “if” or a “when.” We have always had school choice in the United States, through the right of parents to send their child to a private school and through the ability of parents to pick a public school for their child by choosing where to live. Clearly, affluent parents have typically been the main beneficiaries of these forms of school choice.

In recent decades new forms of school choice have arisen that have fundamentally changed the education landscape. In many cases these new mechanisms have provided less affluent families with their first taste of school choice.¹⁷

In both contemporary school reform movements, the ideal of schooling for equal opportunity had moved to the center of the reform rationale.

THE EVOLVING STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL: CONSUMER DEMAND FOR ACCESS AND ADVANTAGE

Educational reform has been only one part of the story of change in the publicness of the American public school. I argue that the education market was more effective than reform movements in shifting the focus of the public school system from creating republican community to promoting individual opportunity. In the context of this essay, I define the education market as the sum of the actions of all educational consumers as they pursue their individual interests through schooling. I define consumers, in turn, as individuals who are acting toward education in their roles as educational consumers, as opposed to their numerous other roles, such as citizens and taxpayers and friends and caring parents and spiritual beings. Their consumer role focuses on the acquisition of education as a private good, for themselves and their children, an acquisition that can enhance their social opportunities in competition with others. From early in the history of American education, American families and individuals have looked on education as an important way to get ahead and stay ahead in a market society. Even before formal schooling was commonplace, families sought to provide their children with the kinds of literacy and numeracy skills that were essential for anyone who wanted to function effectively in the commercial life of the colonies. At stake was not just success but survival.

The introduction of universal public education in the common school era made such basic skills available to everyone in the white population at public expense. This meant that a common school education became established as the baseline level of formal skill for the American populace in the nineteenth century. For the small number of students who gained a more advanced education at an academy, high school, or college, this educational advantage gave them an edge in the competition for the equally small number of clerical, managerial, and professional roles. Late in the nineteenth century, the number of office jobs increased, which raised the value of a high school education, and by the start of the twentieth century, employers increasingly came to use educational qualifications to decide who was qualified for particular jobs, including both white collar and blue collar

17. Julian Betts and Tom Loveless, *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Educational Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 1–2.

positions. At this point, the economic returns on the consumer's investment in education became quite substantial all across the occupational spectrum.¹⁸

For our purposes, in trying to understand the factors affecting the public character of American public schools, the consumer effect on the school system is quite different in both form and function from the reformer effect. One distinction is that reformers over the years have tended to treat education as a public good. They have seen their reform efforts as the solution of a social problem, and the benefits of this reform would be shared by everyone, whether or not they or their children were in school. In contrast, consumers approach education as a private good, which is the personal property of the individual who acquires it. By the late twentieth century, reformers began to graft the private good approach onto the root of their traditional public good approach. But even then they were using the equal opportunity argument to provide political support for a program for schooling that was still primarily focused on producing human capital for the public good.

Another distinction is that reformers are intentionally trying to change the school system and improve society through their reform efforts. In contrast, consumers are simply pursuing their own interests through the medium of education. They are not trying to change schools or reform society; they are just trying to get ahead or at least not fall behind. But, in combination, their individual decisions about pursuing education do exert a significant impact on the school system. These choices shift enrollments from some programs to others and from one level of the system to another. They pressure political leaders to shift public resources into the educational system and to move resources within the system to the locations that are in greatest demand. At the same time, these educational actions by consumers end up exerting a powerful influence not only on schools but also on society. When consumers use education to address their own social problems, the social consequences are no less substantial for being unintended.

The American school system was a deliberate creation of the common school movement, but once the system was set in motion, consumers rather than reformers became its driving force. Consumers drove the extraordinary expansion of American school enrollments to a level higher than anywhere else in the world, starting with the surge from primary school into grammar school in the late nineteenth century, into high school in the first half of the twentieth century, and into college in the second half. Reformers did not make school expansion happen; they just tried to put this consumer-generated school capacity to use in service of their own social goals, particularly the goal of social efficiency. Not only did consumers flood the system with students, but they also transformed the system's structure. They turned the common school, where everyone underwent the same educational experience, into the uncommon school, where everyone entered the

18. For a rich account of the history of the rising relevance of high school on job prospects during this period, see Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

same institution but then pursued different programs. Their most consequential creation in this regard was the tracked comprehensive high school, which established the model for the reconstructed (not reformed) educational system that emerged at the start of the twentieth century and is still very much with us.

At the heart of this reconstructed system is the peculiarly American balance between access and advantage. This balance was not the brainchild of school reformers — that is, it was not proposed as the educational solution to a social problem. Instead, it was the unintended outcome of the actions of individual consumers competing for valuable credentials in the education market. Like any other market, the education market consists of a diverse array of actors competing for advantage by acquiring and exchanging commodities; the difference is that the commodities here are educational credentials. As a result, the education market does not speak with a single voice but with competing voices, and it exerts its impact not by pushing in a single direction but by pushing in multiple directions. When the common school system was introduced into a society with an unequal distribution of social advantages, families naturally started to use it in their efforts to improve or preserve their social situation. The men overseeing the common school inadvertently set off the competition for educational advantage when they created the public high school as a way to lure middle-class families into the public school system. So from the very start, the American school system simultaneously provided broad access to schooling at one level, and exclusive access to schooling at a higher level. The race was on.

For most of the nineteenth century, the high school remained largely a middle-class preserve within the school system. During the same period, working-class enrollments gradually expanded from the lower grades into the grammar school grades. By the 1870s and 1880s, grammar school enrollments were nearing universality in the United States, which led naturally to an increase in consumer demand for access to the high school. Before the end of the century, the system yielded to this demand and began opening a series of new high schools, which led to a rapid expansion of high school enrollments. Increased access for working-class families, however, undercut the advantage that high school attendance had long brought middle-class families. How was education supposed to meet both of these consumer demands within the same school system?

It turns out that the education market was much more adept at constructing such educational solutions to complex social problems than was the school reform process. With a little help from the progressives (who thought tracking was socially efficient), consumer demand created the tracked comprehensive high school. It provided broad access to high school for the entire population while at the same time preserving educational advantage for middle-class students in the upper academic tracks, which started channeling graduates into college. This reconstructed school system really could have it both ways. But how did the education market bring about this remarkable institutional response to a pressing set of social problems?

In a functioning liberal democracy, consumer demand quickly translates into political demand. Working-class families did not have the social position or wealth of their middle-class counterparts, but they did have the numbers. It was very difficult for a democratic government — then or now — to resist strong demand from a majority of voters for broad access to an attractive publicly provided commodity such as schooling, at least for any length of time. At the same time, middle-class citizens — then and now — retained substantial influence in spite of their smaller numbers, so government also had difficulty ignoring their demands to preserve a special place for them within the public school system. If democracy is the art of compromise, the comprehensive high school is the ultimate example of such a compromise frozen in institutional form.

One additional factor makes the education market so effective at shaping the school system. Markets are dynamic; they operate interactively. Individual educational consumers are playing in a game where everyone knows the rules and all actors are able to adjust their behavior in reaction to the behavior of other actors. By the start of the twentieth century, a new rule was emerging in American society: the educational level of prospective employees sets their qualifications for a particular occupational level. To get more pay, get more schooling.

The problem was that some people already had an educational edge, and they had the means to maintain that edge. Their children were in high school and yours were not. So you demanded and gained access to high school, only to find that the ground had shifted. First, it was no longer the same high school but a new one with its own internal hierarchy that placed your children at the bottom. Second, high school was no longer the top of the educational line; college was. The middle-class students in the upper tracks were now heading to college, leaving your children in the same relative position they occupied before — one step behind in the race for educational advantage. The only real difference was that now everyone had more education than before. In the nineteenth century, the credential of advantage was the high school diploma. In the early twentieth century, it was the college degree. By the late twentieth century, it was the graduate degree. The race continues.

Over the years, therefore, educational consumers have been more effective than school reformers in shaping the American school system. Consumers were the ones who developed the institutional core of the system: its delicate balance between access and advantage, and the corresponding organizational structure of the system, combining equality and hierarchy. Consumers have also been more effective than reformers in exerting influence on American society through the medium of schooling. These social effects were not the intention that was guiding consumer behavior in the education market; instead, consumers were trying to use education for their own personal ends, and the societal consequences of their actions were a side effect. For individuals, the school system often has served their purposes: some have found that gaining more education enabled them to get ahead, and others have found that it helped them hold onto their competitive edge. But collectively the social impact of market pressure on schools has cost consumers dearly.

As I and others have argued elsewhere, the system of schooling that consumers created has not been able to increase social equality, nor has it been able to increase upward mobility.¹⁹ The population as a whole has seen its standard of living and quality of life rise as the economy has grown, but schooling has had no effect on the relative position of social groups in the social hierarchy. The rise in the education level of Americans in the last 200 years has been extraordinarily rapid, but this change has not succeeded in shuffling the social deck. People who had an educational edge on the competition were, by and large, able to maintain this edge by increasing their schooling at the same rate as those below them in the status order. The overall effect of this process over time was to increase the average education level of everyone in the labor queue, which artificially inflated educational requirements for jobs. As a result, people were spending more time and money on schooling just in order to keep from falling behind. They were forced to run in order to stay in place.

The education market, therefore, had the cumulative effect of undercutting the economistic version of the public goal for public education that most twentieth-century school reformers aspired to attain — by sharply reducing schooling's social efficiency. At the same time, it turned the pursuit of social opportunity through schooling into an educational treadmill. The core of the problem is Americans' insistence on having things both ways through the magical medium of education. We want schools to express our highest ideals as a society and our greatest aspirations as individuals, but only as long as they remain ineffective in actually enabling us to achieve these goals, since we really do not want to acknowledge that these two aims are at odds with each other. We ask schools to promote equality while preserving privilege, so we perpetuate a system that is too busy balancing opposites to promote student learning. We focus on making the system inclusive at one level and exclusive at the next, in order to make sure that it meets demands for both access and advantage. As a result, the system continues to lure us to pursue the dream of fixing society by reforming schools while continually frustrating our ability to meet these goals. It locks us in a spiral of educational expansion and credential inflation that has come to deplete our resources and exhaust our vitality. And we cannot find a simple cure for this syndrome because we will not accept any remedy that would mean giving up one of our aims for education in favor of another. We want it both ways.

19. See, for example, Labaree, *Someone Has to Fail*; Raymond Boudon, *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society* (New York: Wiley, 1974); and Lester Thurow, "Education and Economic Equality," *Public Interest* 28 (Summer 1972): 66–81.