

Citizens and Consumers:
Changing Visions of Virtue and Opportunity in U.S. Education,
1841- 2002

by David F. Labaree

Stanford University

August 23, 2007

David F. Labaree
Professor and Associate Dean for Student Affairs
School of Education
485 Lasuen Mall
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-3096
Phone: 650-725-6977
Fax: 650-725-7412
E-mail: dlabaree@stanford.edu
Web: <http://www.stanford.edu/~dlabaree/>

A revised version of a paper presented at the conference on “Republican and Non-Republican Imaginations: Comparative Visions and developments of Schooling from the 18th Century to 1930.” Pestalozzian Research Institute for the History of Education, Zurich (University of Applied Sciences, Zurich).

This is a story about the evolving rhetoric of educational reform in the United States. It starts in the early 19th century with a republican vision of education for civic virtue and ends in the early 21st century with a consumerist vision of education for equal opportunity. The story is about how we got from there to here, drawing on major reform texts that span this period.

I argue that this rhetorical transformation was characterized by two main shifts, each of which occurred at two levels. First, the overall balance in the purposes of schooling shifted from a political rationale (shoring up the new republic) to a market rationale (promoting social efficiency and social mobility). And the political rationale itself evolved from a substantive vision of education for civic virtue to a procedural vision of education for equal opportunity. Second, in a closely related change, the rhetorical emphasis shifted from viewing education as a public good to viewing it as a private good. And the understanding of education as a public good itself evolved from a politically-grounded definition (education for republican community) to a market-grounded definition (education for human capital).

I explore these changes through an examination of a series of representative reform documents. These include: Horace Mann's *Fifth and Twelfth Annual Reports as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Public Education* (1841 and 1848); the *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*, appointed by the National Education Association (1893); *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, report of the NEA's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (1918); *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (1954); *A Nation at Risk*, report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983); two major books from the school choice movement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Betts and Loveless, 2005); and the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002).

This American case study in the evolution of educational rhetoric fits within a larger cross-national pattern in the evolving republican discourse of schooling. Republican ideas played a foundational role in the formation of public education in a number of countries during the long 19th century. Although this role varied from one context to another, the republican vision in general called for a system of education that would shape the kind of self regulating and civic minded citizen needed to sustain a viable republican community. That system was the modern public school. At the heart of its mission was the delicate and critical task of balancing two elements at the heart of republican thinking – the autonomous individual and the common good. The primary contribution of the school was its ability to instill a vision of the *res publica* within future citizens in a manner that promoted individual choice while inducing them to pursue the public interest of their own volition. This effort posed twin dangers: too much emphasis on individual interests could turn republican community into a pluralist state that is constituted as a competition of private interests; but too much emphasis on community could turn the republic into authoritarian state that sacrifices individual freedom to collective interests. A liberal republican state requires an educational system that can instill a commitment to both individual liberty and civic virtue.

In this paper, I explore the evolution of the tension between liberty and community in American education through an analysis of key documents in the history of American educational reform. I argue that over time the rhetoric of education shifted from a political vision of the civic minded citizen to a market vision of a self-interested

consumer. But the idea of republican community did not disappear from the educational mission. Instead the political goal of education shifted from the production of civic virtue in the service of the republic to the production of human capital and individual opportunity. The end result, however, was to reconstruct the republican vision of education sharply in the direction of private interests and individual opportunities.

A major factor in the transformation of reform rhetoric was the market. While a number of reform efforts – the common school movement, the progressive movement, the civil rights movement, the standards movement, and the school choice movement – occupied center stage in the drama of school reform, initially the market exerted its impact from a position off stage. Over time, however, the market gradually muscled its way into the center of American education, shaping both the structure of schooling (characterized by stratification and credentialism) and more recently the rhetoric of school reform (with its emphasis on producing human capital and promoting individual opportunity). In the current period (which marks the end of this story), when the market vision is driving the educational agenda, the political vision of education’s social role remains salient as an actor in the reform drama, frequently called upon by reformers of all stripes. (I examine here the way the standards and choice movements both belatedly adopted political rhetoric.) But the definition of this political vision has become more abstract, its deployment more adaptable, and its impact more diffuse than in the early nineteenth century, when a well-defined set of republican ideals drove the creation of the American system of common schools.¹

Below I explore these themes in the changing rhetoric of educational reform in the U.S., focusing on major reform texts. In the interest of space, and to avoid turning this analysis of changing educational rhetoric into a history of American schooling, I spend minimal time locating these texts historically. These are familiar documents to scholars who have an acquaintance with the history of American school reform, so I operate under the assumption that the reader is reasonably familiar with them and focus my attention on the position they occupy within the larger story of evolving educational rhetoric.

The Common School Movement: Schools for the Republic

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. Its primary accomplishment was not in increasing literacy, which was already widespread in the U.S., but in drawing public support for a publicly funded and publicly controlled system of education that served all the members of the community. What was new was less the availability of education than its definition as an institution that both expressed and reinforced community.

¹ In the 1990s, I developed an interpretation of the history of American education as a shifting terrain defined by the relative influence at particular points in time of three major goals for public education: democratic equality (preparing competent citizens), social efficiency (preparing productive workers), and social mobility (preparing individuals to get ahead socially) (Labaree, 1997). This paper is an attempt to complicate that earlier story, in particular by exploring the ways in which the political goal of education has itself evolved over time.

Mann's *Twelfth Annual Report*, published in 1848, provides the most comprehensive summary of the argument for the common schools. And he makes clear that the primary rationale for this institution is political: to create citizens with the knowledge, skills, and public-spirited dispositions 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 posed by social class to the fabric of republican community, he proclaims:

Now, surely, nothing but Universal Education can counter-work this tendency to the domination of capital and the servility of labor....

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. I do not here mean that it so elevates the moral nature as to make men disdain and abhor the oppression of their fellow-men. This idea pertains to another of its attributes. But I mean that it gives each man the independence and the means, by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich; it prevents being poor.... 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. (Cremin, 1957, p. 87)

A few pages later, he sums 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” (p. 92). In his view, then, schools are given the centrally important political task of making citizens for a republic. All other functions are subordinate to this one.

In the political rhetoric of the common school movement, we can also see some other themes with a more economic flavor that will become the centerpiece of later reform movements. One is the importance of education in reducing social differences by enhancing social opportunities for all, as shown in the passage above. Another is the value of education as an investment in human capital. Mann devoted part of his *Fifth Annual Report* (1841) to the latter issue.

If it can be proved that the aggregate wealth of a town will be increased just in proportion to the increase of its appropriations for schools, the opponents of such a measure will be silenced. The tax for this purpose, which they now look upon as a burden, they will then regard as a profitable investment.... When the money expended for education shall be viewed in its true character, as seed-grain sown in a soil which is itself enriched by yielding, then the most parsimonious will not stint the sowing, lest the harvest, also, should be stinted, and, thereby, thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold, should be lost to the garners. (Mann, 1841, p. 81)

Yet his defense of the human capital rationale for schooling is backhanded at best. He was a little embarrassed to be talking about the crass economic returns on education, as he explains in his introduction to this discussion.

This view, so far from being the highest which can be taken of the beneficent influences of education, may, perhaps, be justly regarded as the lowest. But it is a palpable view. It presents an aspect of the subject susceptible of being made intelligible to all; and, therefore, it will meet the case of thousands, who are

now indifferent about the education of their offspring, because they foresee no reimbursement in kind,—no return in money, or in money's worth, for money expended. The cooperation of this numerous class is indispensable, in order to carry out the system; and if they can be induced to educate their children, even from inferior motives, the children, when educated, will feel its higher and nobler affinities. (p. 81)

Thus economic arguments are useful in drawing needed support to the common schools, but they play merely a supporting role in the “higher and nobler” mission of supporting republican community. Only in the 20th century would such economic arguments take center stage.

Emerging Consumerism: Schools for Social Mobility

If Horace Mann and the other leaders of the common school movement were reluctant to portray education as mechanism for promoting worldly gain, the students and parents who were consuming this new cultural commodity showed less reluctance in that regard. The need to survive and the ambition to thrive in a market economy compelled citizens to think of education as something more than a politically desirable mechanism for preserving the republic; it was also a means to upward mobility. Reading, writing, and the manipulation of numbers were essential for anyone who wanted to function effectively in the commercial life of the colonial and early national periods of American history. Individuals did not need republican theory or compulsory schooling laws to make them acquire these skills, which is why literacy was a precursor rather than an outcome of the common schools in the U.S.

But this compelling rationale for education – schooling for social mobility – was not something that appeared prominently in the rhetoric of school reform until well into the 20th century. One reason for this silence was that the idea of education as a way to get ahead was a matter of common sense in a society that was founded in market relations. It was not the subject of reform rhetoric because this idea was already widely accepted. Another reason was that this self-interested motive for education was embarrassing to verbalize in the face of the selfless rationales for education that dominated public discourse in the American colonies and the early United States. After the revolution and in the early national period, the dominant educational rhetoric focused on a political goal for schooling; before, then, during the colonial period, the dominant educational rhetoric was religious. The Massachusetts School Law of 1647 sets the rhetorical tone for religious grounding of colonial 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.... (Cremin, 1970, p. 181)

In the face of this rhetoric, backed by the full authority of scripture, to argue publicly that people should pursue education for reasons of commercial gain would seem not only mean-spirited but nearly heretical. But the absence of such talk did not deny the reality that commercial motives for schooling were strong.

This relative silence about an important factor shaping education resonates with an important paradox in the history of school reform identified by David Tyack and Larry Cuban in their book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995). They note that American educational reform is often understood in two contradictory ways: Schools are continually being churned by one wave of reform after another; but at the same time, schools seem to stay the same or change only slowly. The reason for this, they argue, is that reform rhetoric swirls around the surface of schools, making a lot of noise but not necessarily penetrating below the surface; while evolutionary forces of structural change may be proceeding powerfully but slowly outside of view, making substantial changes over time without ever necessarily being verbalized or becoming part of a reform agenda.

The story I am telling in this paper is about the interaction between these two levels – the changing rhetoric of educational reform in the U.S. over the past 200 years and its relationship with the quiet but increasingly potent impact of market forces on American schools. In many ways, the common school movement was a Whig effort to preserve the benefits of the burgeoning market economy in the antebellum U.S. while ameliorating its destructive tendencies – the class differences and competing interests that threatened to destroy the civic virtue needed to sustain a fragile republic. The rhetorical shifts in subsequent educational reform movements can likewise be seen as efforts to reach an accommodation between economy and society through the institution of education, which turns increasingly critical as education itself becomes more economically salient in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

In *The Making of an American High School* (1988), I explore the way in which educational consumerism emerged as an unintended consequence of the invention of the public high school in the 19th century. Central High School was founded in Philadelphia in 1838 for the most Whiggish of reasons. Its founders liked to call it “the school of the republic,” and they saw it as an effective mechanism for encouraging middle class families to send their children to the new common schools, thus making these schools a true embodiment of republican community. But in order to make the high school sufficiently attractive to draw students from the best private schools, they inadvertently created a highly marketable commodity – with a marble edifice, the latest scientific equipment, and a faculty of distinguished professors – which became the object of intense competition among educational consumers. It introduced a form of invidious educational distinction that was highly visible (the only school of its kind in a large city), culturally legitimate (open to anyone who could meet its academic standards), and scarce (offering a degree to only one in a hundred of the students entering the school system). These characteristics made a Central diploma quite valuable as a way for students to distinguish themselves from competitors, even though at the time the job market was not exerting demand for the skills acquired in a secondary education. But by the 1890s, when growing clerical and managerial occupations created a defined market for high school graduates, the enormous demand for access forced the school system to expand from two high schools (Central and its female counterpart) to a whole system of community high schools throughout the city. And the new structure – organized around the model of the

comprehensive community high school, which continues to characterize American secondary education – managed to preserve the exclusivity of the old Central High in the face of greater accessibility by creating a stratified curriculum, which allowed some graduates to gain greater distinction than others.

Committee of Ten: Commonality without Citizenship

In 1893, at the same time that consumer pressure was transforming secondary education in Philadelphia, a committee presented to the National Educational Association a proposed new structure for the high school curriculum. The Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies was made up of six professors, three high school principals, and the US. Commissioner of Education; Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, served as chair. The committee's report is interesting less for its impact, which was minimal, than for its iconic status in later educational debates. It occupies a transitional position, as the final attenuated expression of the common school movement, poised to be swept away by the emerging progressive movement. The progressives dismissed the report with scorn, calling it the last gasp of a discredited vision of traditional academic schooling, pushed on the schools by a group of self-interested college professors. Contemporary critics of progressivism – like Diane Ravitch (2000), David Angus, and Jeffrey Mirel (Angus & Mirel, 1999) – see it as the road not taken, which would have saved us from the ravages of progressive reform and which in some ways has been resurrected and reaffirmed by the standards movement.

For our purposes, I will focus on what is usually seen as the main issue in a very long report, the committee's insistence that the high school curriculum should be quite similar in length and content for all students, whether or not they were heading to college. There is much about this argument that is resonant with the common school reformers, but the rhetorical representation of the argument is markedly different.

On one very important question of general policy which affects profoundly the preparation of all school programmes, the Committee of Ten and all the Conferences are absolutely unanimous....

...The Committee of Ten unanimously agree with the Conferences. Ninety-eight teachers, intimately concerned either with the actual work of American secondary schools, or with the results of that work as they appear in students who come to college, unanimously declare that every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease. Thus, for all pupils who study Latin, or history, or algebra, for example, the allotment of time and the method of instruction in a given school should be the same year by year. Not that all the pupils should pursue every subject for the same number of years; but so long as they do pursue it, they should all be treated alike. (Krug, 1961, pp. 86-87)

This proposal would resonate with Horace Mann and the other members of the common school movement, since it would preserve the republican practice of education as an experience shared by the whole community. Education should supply citizens with a common set of competences needed for active political participation, and it should work to counterbalance the stratifying tendencies in the market economy with an emphasis on

building a republican community. Both argue for a common curriculum. But as we have seen, in Philadelphia and elsewhere, the market was driving the high school curriculum in the other direction, stratifying curriculum choices and school experiences according to students' occupational trajectory and class origins. In many ways this report can be read – as Ravitch, Angus, and Mirel do – as a cry for preserving a common education at just the point that the institution was moving sharply toward stratification.

But what a muted cry it was. Gone is the grandiloquent language of Horace Mann, the appeals to the high-level political values, the passionate vision of education as the savior of society. In a report of nearly 19,000 words, there is not a single use of terms like “citizen,” “republic,” or “democracy.” Replacing republican rhetoric is the cautious, circumscribed, bureaucratic language of a committee of professional educators. In the 50 years since Horace Mann wrote, the common school system he promoted had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. It had become the standard model for American education, defining what future generations would come to see as the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It had expanded from elementary to grammar to high school. And it had generated a professional corps of teachers and administrators and college professors, who saw their work as a professional practice rather than a political vocation. And so the committee uses a coolly professional rhetoric, narrowly confined to the issues at hand, sticking strictly to the business of schooling. This make the report more appropriate to its audience in the NEA, made up of other professional educators, but it left the committee's proposals without a solid rhetorical grounding in the surrounding society. If it is not for the benefit of building republican community, then why should high schools have a core curriculum? The report does not really answer this question, except for a feeble wave in the direction of efficiency: “The principle laid down by the Conferences will, if logically carried out, make a great simplification in secondary school programmes” (p. 87). In the absence of solid grounding, the committee made it easy for the progressives to attribute their recommendations to a simple desire to hang on to traditional school subjects and to impose antiquated college curriculum needs on the modern high school.

Administrative Progressivism: Schools for Social Efficiency

The progressive education movement burst on the scene in the U.S. at the start of the 20th century. It was a complex movement with a wide range of actors and tendencies embedded within it, but two main strands in particular stand out. Pedagogical progressives (such as John Dewey and William Kilpatrick) focused on teaching and learning in classrooms, advocating child centered pedagogy, discovery learning, and student engagement. Administrative progressives (such as Edward Thorndike, Ellwood Cubberley, and David Snedden) focused on the structure of school governance and curriculum, advocating a mission of social efficiency for schools, which meant preparing students for their future social roles. I focus on administrative progressivism here for the simple reason that they won and the pedagogues lost in the competition over exerting an impact on American schools.²

² The terms administrative and pedagogical progressives come from David Tyack (1974). I discuss the tension between the two and the reasons for the victory of the administrative wing in *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (2004, chapters 7 & 8).

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (chaired by David Snedden) 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 more consequentially than any other single document. The report announces at the very beginning that secondary schools need to change in response to changes in society.

Within the past few decades changes have taken place in American life profoundly affecting the activities of the individual. As a citizen, he must to a greater extent and in a more direct way cope with problems of community life, State and National Governments, and international relationships. As a worker, he must adjust himself to a more complex economic order. As a relatively independent personality, he has more leisure. The problems arising from these three dominant phases of life are closely interrelated and 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. (p. 1)

Here we see the basic themes of the report: 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 needed qualities of “intelligence and efficiency.”

This focus on social efficiency, however, doesn’t deter the authors from drawing on political rhetoric to support their position. In fact, perhaps reacting to the Committee of Ten report, or learning from its failure to have a lasting impact on schooling, the authors framed this report in explicitly political terms. In a 12,000 word report, they use the terms “democracy” or “democratic” no fewer than 40 times, an average of 1.5 usages per page; the terms “citizen” or “citizenship” appear 16 times. (The words “republic” and “republican” are nowhere to be found.)

What do they mean by democracy? They spell this out in two statements in bold-faced type in a section called “The Goal of Education in a Democracy.”

The purpose of democracy is so to organize society that each member may develop his personality primarily through activities designed for the well-being of his fellow members and of society as a whole....

Consequently, 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 himself and society toward ever nobler ends. (p. 3)

So democracy is about organizing individuals for the benefit of society, and education is about readying individuals to assume their proper place in that society. This is as crisp a definition as one can find for socially efficient education.

The commission follows up on this statement principles to spell out the implications for the high school curriculum:

This commission, therefore, regards the following as the main objectives of education: 1. Health. 2. Command of fundamental processes. 3. Worthy home membership. 4. Vocation. 6. Citizenship. 6. Worthy use of leisure. 7. Ethical character.

What a striking array of goals for education this is. In comparison with Horace Mann's grand vision of schooling for the republic, we have a list of useful functions that schools can serve for society, only one of which focuses on citizenship. Furthermore, this list confines the rich array of liberal arts subjects, which constituted the entire curriculum proposed by the Committee of Ten, to a single category; the authors give it the dumbed-down and dismissive title, "command of fundamental processes;" and they assign it a parallel position with such mundane educational objectives as "worthy home membership" and "worthy use of leisure."

Later in the report, the commission spells out an important implication of their vision of secondary education. Not only must the curriculum be expanded radically beyond the academic confines of the Committee of Ten's vision, but it must also be sharply differentiated if it is going to meet the needs of a differentiated occupational structure:

The work of the senior high school should be organized into differentiated curriculums. The range of such curriculums should be as wide as the school can offer effectively. The basis of differentiation should be; in the broad sense of the term, vocational, thus justifying the names commonly given, such as agricultural, business, clerical, industrial, fine-arts, and household-arts curriculums. Provision should be made also for those having distinctively academic interests and needs.
(p. 16)

The commission is explaining that their call for a socially efficient education in practice means vocationalism, with the vocational skills required by the job market driving the curriculum and slicing it into segments based on the specific jobs toward which students are heading. Any leftover space in the curriculum could then be used for "those having distinctively academic interests and needs."

This report, the keystone of the administrative progressive movement, represents two major transformations in the rhetoric of the common school movement. First, whereas Mann's reports use economic arguments to support a primarily political purpose for schooling (preparing citizens with civic virtue), Snedden's report turns this upside down, using political arguments about the requirements of democracy to support a vision of schooling that was primarily economic (preparing efficient workers). The politics of the *Cardinal Principles* thus serves as a thin veneer on a structure of socially efficient education, dressing up what would otherwise be a depressingly pedestrian vision, without being specified in sufficient depth as to intrude on the newly asserted vocational function of schooling.

Second, in *Cardinal Principles*, the administrative progressives preserve the common school movement's understanding of education as a public good. There is no talk in the report about education as a kind of personal property, which offers selective benefits to the credential holder; instead, the emphasis is relentlessly on the collective benefits of education to society. What is new, however, is this: Whereas the common school men defined education as a public good in political terms, the progressives defined it in economic terms. Yes, education serves the interests of society as a whole, say the progressives; but it does so not through the production of civic virtue but through the production of human capital.

The Civil Rights Movement: Schools for 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 mechanism for creating productive workers, the civil rights movement brought politics back to the center of the debate about schools. In the 1954 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 U.S. 483), Chief Justice Earl Warren, speaking for a unanimous court, makes a forceful political argument for the need to desegregate American schools. The question he was addressing was whether to overturn the Court's doctrine of "separate but equal," established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1894, as a violation of the clause in the Fourteenth Amendment to the constitution (passed at the end of the Civil War) which guaranteed all citizens the "equal protection of the laws." In past cases, the Court was able to duck the question by ordering school systems to equalize the funding of black and white schools. But in this case, "the Negro and white schools involved have been equalized, or are being equalized, with respect to buildings, curricula, qualifications and salaries of teachers, and other "tangible" factors," which forced the Court to address the central issue:

We come then to the question presented: 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 moves through two main steps in reaching this conclusion. First, Warren argues that the social meaning of education has changed dramatically in the 90 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 has now changed.

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it 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 leads to the second part of the argument. If education "is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms," then the question is whether segregated education can be considered to provide truly equal educational opportunity for black and white students. Here the Warren draws on social science research to argue that "To separate [black students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." He continues by quoting from a finding by a lower court in the case:

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, 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.^[n10]

In combination, these two arguments – education is an essential right and segregated education is inherently harmful – lead 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 and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. This disposition makes unnecessary any discussion whether such segregation also violates the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The argument in this decision is at heart political, asserting that education is a constitutional right of every citizen that must be granted to everyone on equal terms. In this sense, it is a striking change from the *Cardinal Principles* report, which deployed the words “democracy” and “citizenship” in support of an argument that was at heart economic. 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 civil rights 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 cultural commodity. In this sense, then, *Brown* depicts education as a private good, whose benefits accrue to the degree holder and not to society as a whole. The Court’s argument is not that granting access to equal education for blacks will enhance society, black and white; instead, it argues that blacks are suffering from segregation and will benefit from desegregation. Quality education was an important form property that they had been denied, and the remedy was to provide them with access to it.

Note the language of the decision: “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.” Schools enable individuals to succeed in life, and politically we cannot deny them this opportunity. This is an argument that shows how much schools had come of age more than 100 years after Horace Mann. Once created to support the republic, in a time when schools were marginal to the practical business of making a living, they had become central to every citizen’s ability to get a good job and get ahead socially. In the process, however, the political vision of education has changed from a substantive focus on producing the citizens needed to sustain the republic to a procedural focus on providing social opportunities. The idea of education as opportunity was already visible in Mann, but it was subordinated to the political project; here educational opportunity has become the project, and politics has become the means for asserting one’s right to it.

The Standards Movement, ver. 1: Social Efficiency and Commonality

In 1983, the National Commission for Excellence in Education produced a report titled *A Nation at Risk*, which helped turn the nascent standards effort into a national reform movement. It is useful to think of this movement in relation to its predecessors, both in the way it drew from them and the way it reacted against them rhetorically. From the Committee of Ten the standards movement drew the idea of a core academic curriculum for all students, which in turn stands as a harsh rebuke to the diffuse, differentiated, and nonacademic curriculum posed by *Cardinal Principles*; yet *A Nation at Risk* also shows a clear affinity with *Principles* by defining the primary purpose of education as social efficiency. At the same time, the standards movement's emphasis on academic content and learning outcomes serves as a counter to the civil rights movement, which focused primarily on access to educational opportunity rather than the substance of learning; and its stress on education as a public good contrasts with *Brown's* emphasis on education as a form of individual benefit.

The reports gets off to a fast start, levying a dire warning about how bad things are and how important it is 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. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the 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. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur – others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (p. 7)

This passage sets the tone for the rest of the report. It asserts 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. This is in striking contrast with the vision of education in the *Brown* decision, which depicted education as a private good, one that was critically important to the possibility of social success for every individual. In that view, it was black educational consumers who were at risk from segregation, not the nation.

But the report represents education as a particular type of public good, which benefits American society by providing it with the human capital it needs in order to be economically competitive with other nations.

History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. 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. (p. 8)

The risk to the nation posed here is primarily economic, and the main role that education can play in alleviating this risk is to develop a more efficient mechanism for turning students into productive workers. As we saw in *Cardinal Principles*, the issue of wealth production that Horace Mann saw as one of the “inferior motives” for supporting public education is here reasserted as the most salient of motives in pushing for higher educational standards.

The report’s first three recommendations spelled out the core substance of the changes at the top of the priority list for the standards movement. Under the heading, “Content,” the commission recommended “that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics,” which included 3-4 years of English, math, science, and social studies, plus some work in computer science (p. 22). Under the heading “Standards and Expectations,” the commission recommended “more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student content.” In particular, this meant that “Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work” (p. 24). Under the heading, “Time,” the commission recommended “that significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year” (p. 25).

In stressing the need to refocus attention on a core academic curriculum for all students, *A Nation at Risk* stands as a rebuke to the differentiated and vocationalized curriculum of the *Cardinal Principles* and a bow in the direction of the Committee of Ten, but it embraced the *Principles’* vision of education for social efficiency. It deploys a modest form of political rhetoric to support the standards effort (using some version of “citizen” 18 times and “democracy” two times in a nearly 18,000 word report, and including one quote from Jefferson), but the emphasis here is on education as a way to produce the human capital needed by the nation in global competition rather than *Brown’s* emphasis on education as a way to promote individual opportunity. And by focusing on student learning rather than student access, it also represents a turn away from the equal opportunity concerns of the *Brown* decision.

School Choice Movement, ver. 1: Consumerism and Social Efficiency

The school choice movement traces its roots to Milton Friedman, who devoted a chapter to the subject in his 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom*. But the movement really took off as a significant reform effort in the 1990s, and a major text that shaped the policy discourse of these movement was a book by John Chubb and Terry Moe – *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools* – which was published by the Brookings Institution in 1990. The argument they raise in favor of school choice consists of key components. First, they use the literature on school effectiveness to argue that schools are most effective (that is, they are most efficient at promoting student learning) if they have the greatest degree of autonomy in administration, teaching, and curriculum. Second, they argue 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

greater school autonomy. As a result, they conclude, we need to shift from democratic to market control of schooling in order to make schools more educationally effective.

Like the standards movement, the choice movement inverted the rhetorical priorities of the common school movement, putting markets before politics. But the approach was more radical than the one proposed in *A Nation at Risk*, because Chubb and Moe argue that democratic politics is in fact the reason that schools perform badly, and the remedy is remove schools from democratic control and hand them over to educational consumers: “Our guiding principle in the design of a choice system is this: public authority must be put to use in creating a system that is almost entirely beyond the reach of public authority” (p. 218). Markets, they argue, are simply more efficient at promoting the school autonomy needed for effective teaching and learning:

In a market setting, then, there are strong forces at work – arising from the technical, administrative, and consumer-satisfaction requirements of organizational success – that promote school autonomy. Organizations that want to build and nurture successful schools will have incentives to decentralize authority to the school level....

In the public sector, the institutional forces work in the opposite direction. The *raison d’être* of democratic control is to impose higher order values on schools, and thus limit their autonomy. (pp. 37-38)

The authors welcome 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.

When it comes to the basic issue of whose interests find reflection in society’s schools, these two systems clearly function under real-world conditions to promote very different social outcomes. 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. These differences are absolutely fundamental to the two systems, however imperfectly each may work in practice. (p. 35)

In this way, then, the rhetoric of the school choice movement at the end of the 20th century represents 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 19th century. In educational reform texts, we 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 are extolling the benefits of having an atomized school system serve the differential needs a vast array of disparate consumer subcultures.

Standards and Choice, ver. 2: Broadening the Base with an Appeal to Equal Opportunity

At the start of the 21st century, we see an interesting shift in the rhetoric of both the standards movement and the choice movement, as both incorporate the language of equal opportunity from the civil rights movement. Whether these changes represent a

change of heart or merely change of strategy is beyond the scope of my argument here. My focus is on the changing rhetoric of reform, and in both cases the change helps broaden the appeal of the reform effort by expanding the reasons for joining the 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.

A Nation at Risk made a strong case for supporting educational standards and accountability on the grounds of social efficiency. Whereas this approach was necessary and effective in encouraging governors and legislators to pass enabling legislation at the state level, it was not sufficient to gain the support of Congress and the general public for a national standards initiative. The problem is that talking about education as an investment in human capital makes the reform sound sensible and prudent as a matter of general policy, but it was hard to get people excited about the effort. If economics is the dismal science, this quality also transfers to economic rationales for education. Like any public good, the investment in human capital suffers from the free rider problem, since we will all gain benefits whether or not we directly contribute to it; private interests in a variety of alternative investments may trump this particular public interest in education. A political appeal can help turn free riders into active supporters, but *A Nation at Risk* made a political appeal in only a rather limited and not terribly effective manner. The main approach was to depict the consequences of educational failure as a threat to the viability of the United States as a nation in global competition, thus the apocalyptic rhetoric in the report's opening passages. But the threats posed by "the rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" feel rather far-fetched to the average citizen and congressperson. So both the first President Bush and President Clinton tried and failed to launch a national standards effort. However in January, 2002, the second President 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* (Public Law 107-110). Listen to the language in the opening section of the act, which constitutes the most powerful accomplishment of the school standards movement:

TITLE I--IMPROVING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF THE
DISADVANTAGED

SEC. 1001. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE.

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 purpose can be accomplished by —

- (1) ensuring that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging State academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement;
- (2) meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation's highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children,

migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance;

(3) closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers;

(4) holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students, while providing alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education;

(5) distributing and targeting resources sufficiently to make a difference to local educational agencies and schools where needs are greatest;

(6) improving and strengthening accountability, teaching, and learning by using State assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging State academic achievement and content standards and increasing achievement overall, but especially for the disadvantaged....

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 remediate social inequality by enhancing educational opportunity. The opening sentence captures both elements succinctly: “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.”

The school choice movement had a rhetorical problem that was similar in some ways to the one facing the standards movement and different in other ways, but the message of equal opportunity worked just as well for choice reformers as it did for standards reformers. What was similar about the choice problem was the difficulty in selling choice as an exercise in efficiency. Chubb and Moe stress that market-based schools are more effective than politics-based schools, but effectiveness is not the kind of issue that mobilizes the citizenry to support a major change in the way schools are structured. That is particularly the case for the choice movement, since the proposed transformation was such a radical departure from the time-honored pattern of school governance established in the common school era. Standards reformers are tinkering with curriculum and tests; choice reformers are attacking the democratic control of schools. It is hard to win a political fight in the U.S. if you cede the pro-democracy position to your opponents. Compounding the problem was the possibility that market-based schooling would exacerbate social inequality by allowing schools to segregate themselves along lines of class and race in response to consumer preferences. If the possible benefits are defined only as greater school effectiveness and the possible costs were defined as a retreat from democracy and equality, then the battle for school choice looks hopeless. A series of ballot failures in proposals for school vouchers seemed to confirm this judgment.

In the late 1990s, however, the politics of school choice became more complex with the introduction of a new rhetorical approach to the choice movement's repertoire. There is no canonical source to draw from in exploring this change; instead, it was a rhetorical shift that spread widely throughout the movement. As one possible example among many, I use a book by Julian Betts and Tom Loveless, *Getting Choice Right*, published in 2005 by Brookings, which also published the book by Chubb and Moe. The essence of the shift in emphasis from the earlier book is captured in the new book's subtitle: "Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Educational Policy." Adding equity changes the valence of the choice argument. Instead of being seen as a threat to social equality, choice now can be presented as a way to spread social opportunity to the disadvantaged.

At the start of their book, Betts and Loveless agree with the judgment that "school choice in the United States is here to stay and likely to grow" (p. 1). The only issue is how to implement it effectively.

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. (pp. 1-2)

This shift toward a rhetoric of equal opportunity changes everything in the way the choice argument is received, and it has transformed the political complexion of the effort. Once favored primarily by libertarians, economists, and free market Republicans, it has now picked up support from a variety of sectors. One major supporter is Howard Fuller, a black community leader and former Milwaukee school superintendent, who heads the pro-choice organization Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). He argues that

We must give low-income and working-class parents the power to choose schools – public or private, nonsectarian or religious – where their children will succeed. And we must give all schools the incentives to work to meet children's needs. Consider the power of choice in the hands of families who have little or no power because they control no resources. Consider how the absence of choice will continue to consign their children to schools that the affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children. (Fuller, 2002)

Even Marxist economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have come to argue that school choice could enhance social equity (Bowles & Gintis, 1999). Adding equal opportunity to the argument had helped broaden the appeal of both the standards movement and the choice movement.

Conclusion

This has been a story about the changing rhetoric of American educational reform. We have seen a transition from a political vision to a market vision of education, from a focus on education as a way to create citizens for an emerging republic to a focus on education as a way to allow citizens to get ahead in a market society. During this

century and a half, however, we have not seen the political argument for education disappear. Instead, we have seen it become transformed from the argument that education promotes civic virtue among citizens to the argument that education promotes social mobility among consumers. In the latter form, the political vision of education has retained a strong rhetorical presence in the texts of educational reform. Yet the persistence of a political argument for education has come at a cost. Gone is the notion that schools exist to promote civic virtue for the preservation of a republic community; in its place is the notion that schools exist to give all consumers access to a valuable form of educational commodity. This is a political vision of a very different sort, which transforms education from a public good to a private good, and from a source of political community to a source of individual opportunity.

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