

# The Middle Class Fights Back

---

*How Progressive Movements  
Can Restore Democracy in  
America*

**BRIAN D'AGOSTINO**

**New Trends and Ideas in American Politics**

*Raymond A. Smith and Jon Rynn, Series Editors*

 **PRAEGER** (2012)

AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

## PRAISE FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS FIGHTS BACK

*This powerful book is a crucial voice in the historic fightback movement against injustice in America. Don't miss it.* –Cornel West, Professor, Union Theological Seminary

\* \* \* \* \*

*It is conventional wisdom that downsizing most of America's military capabilities would destabilize international security and a democratic world order. D'Agostino's methodical analysis shatters that picture, exposing how it upholds the power of state and corporate elites at the expense of the populace, at home and abroad. He shows how demilitarization can be achieved without jeopardizing real security, freeing up resources needed for a green New Deal that can provide productive livelihoods for ordinary people and a viable ecology for future generations. This is what is meant by 'human security,' which D'Agostino argues is the proper aim of government. His book is a tour de force!* –Saul H. Mendlovitz, Dag Hammarskjöld Professor, Rutgers Law School-Newark

\* \* \* \* \*

*D'Agostino exposes the truth behind the corporate-driven education reform movement and offers the kind of research- and experience-based conversation about real reforms that would truly improve our public education system and that our policy-makers should be having. He reminds us that, rather than rely on these elites, parents, young people and educators must fight to transform our public education system and, more broadly, for the fiscal priorities our country needs and our children deserve.* –Julie Cavanagh, The Grassroots Education Movement, Producer of The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Middle Class Fights Back cogently argues that it was unions and government that created the middle class as we once knew it, and that the shrinking of unions, beginning in the 1970s, has had a devastating effect on the prosperity of ordinary people. Arguing that militarism and capital flight are undermining the country's capacity to produce wealth, D'Agostino's provocative book makes the case for massive public investment in green technology and for the creation of a new economy of worker-owned and -controlled enterprises.* –Moshe Adler, Author of Economics for the Rest of Us: Debunking the Science that Makes Life Dismal (The New Press, 2010)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian D'Agostino, PhD, teaches political economy and history at the Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. Center for Labor Studies, Empire State College, State University of New York. He previously taught political science at Adelphi University and City University of New York, and worked 11 years as a New York City public school teacher. D'Agostino holds a doctorate from Columbia University and is the author of numerous publications on public affairs and political psychology, including the peer-reviewed article "Self-Images of Hawks and Doves."

# Contents

Series Foreword	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii
<b>PART I: ~ HOW THE RICH RULE</b>	<b>1</b>
1 ~ The National Security Scam	3
2 ~ The Attack on Wages and Benefits	29
3 ~ School Reform and Other Diversions	55
4 ~ The Attack on Government	83
<b>PART II: ~ THE NEW PROGRESSIVE AGENDA</b>	<b>95</b>
5 ~ Government for the People	97
6 ~ Markets without Capitalism	129
7 ~ Unleashing Minds and Brains	143
8 ~ Renewing Democracy	159
Appendix: Psychology of the Radical Right	169
Bibliography	177
Index	00

# CHAPTER 3

## School Reform and Other Diversions

---

### INTRODUCTION

The national security, postindustrial, and neoliberal belief systems promised national greatness and ever-increasing prosperity. For more than three decades, however, there has been a growing chasm between these promises and the actual economic fortunes of tens of millions of Americans. Mass discontent increasingly threatens the plausibility of these ideologies and the state capitalist power structure they legitimize. Corporate elites deflect this discontent from themselves and maintain the sacred-cow status of their capitalism-friendly policies by attributing national decline to scapegoats—especially unions, “government” (defined to exclude the national security state and corporate welfare), and a public education system that is allegedly failing to prepare America’s youth to compete in the global economy.

Further, through their ownership and control of vast media conglomerates, their domination of electoral politics and the state, and their influence over cultural institutions that depend on their philanthropy, America’s ruling class propagates this self-serving ideology of sacred cows and scapegoats deep into the consciousness of ordinary people. This is not to say that all the rich and powerful are engaged in deliberate propaganda, though some certainly are. Rather, as in past ages, ruling elites generally believe in the ideologies they propagate, which serve to simultaneously legitimize their power in the eyes of others and enable them to feel good about themselves. The Spanish conquistadores, for example, thought of themselves not as oppressors but rather as enlightened leaders bringing lost souls to Christ. Similarly, British imperialists

dwelt not on their appropriation of others' natural resources but instead on the "white man's burden" they were taking up.

So, too, most CEOs and other big power holders in America today do not think about the negative consequences of their policies for ordinary people. They no doubt believe their own ideology—that unions and government are impediments to the creation of wealth and that in clearing away these impediments they are promoting not only their own fortunes but also the prosperity of others. I begin this chapter with an important special case of such ideology—school reform neoliberalism—which holds that some communities are trapped in poverty not because capitalism is failing them but because incompetent teachers, protected by self-serving unions, are not providing the education that disadvantaged children need to succeed. That ideology is summed up in the 2010 film *Waiting for Superman*.<sup>1</sup> This same alleged failure of public education, according to the school reformers, is responsible for America's difficulties competing in the global economy.

Such beliefs about public education are widely held in the United States today. A front-page story in the *New York Times* titled "Teachers Wonder: Why the Heapings of Scorn?" (Gabriel 2011) elicited passionate letters to the editor from both critics and defenders. One reader wrote,

It is a mystery why teachers fail to understand the public perception. They do not work a full day, they have significant time off during the day, they have extensive vacation time, they can be granted tenure and they have a retirement benefits package that is the envy of all except top corporate executives. Any additional activity, like being a coach, club leader or adviser, is generally compensated.

---

1. The director of this film and its star Geoffrey Canada, like many well-intentioned social entrepreneurs in the field of school reform, have somehow managed to overlook the fact that the foreign countries they think are outperforming the United States academically typically have unionized teachers. What these countries do not have are the vast extremes of wealth and poverty and inequitable school funding that are common in the United States. *Waiting for Superman* dismisses the role of money with the observation that spending per student has gone up in recent decades while academic performance has not. But such aggregate statistics say nothing about which school districts benefited most from the increase in spending, how additional money in poor school districts was actually spent, and the increasing challenges faced by poor districts during this same period (Adler 2010). The film implies that affluent school districts spend their money frivolously, ignoring the well-established role of smaller class sizes in academic performance (Class Size Matters 2011; Krucger and Whitmore 2001; Mishel and Rothstein 2002). For a well-informed critique of *Waiting for Superman*, see the DVD *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* (Grassroots Education Movement 2011). See also D'Agostino (2012b).

Now don't get me wrong. The uniformed unions also have over-reaching benefits that need renegotiation. But it is the teachers with whom the public has the greatest contact and who regularly whine about how poorly treated they are and demand raises from struggling taxpayers on whose shoulders their compensation falls.

It is high time they wake up and begin to understand that they do not exist in a vacuum and that their ivory towers need a dose of reality.

Another reader gave the perspective of most teachers:

I wish that everyone who thinks that teachers are "glorified baby sitters" who go home at 3 o'clock could spend a week doing the job. For decades I have nagged my husband to quit teaching because I can't stand his 70-hour workweeks. As a New York City high school teacher, he has on average 170 students each day. That translates into 170 tests and essays to mark on a regular basis, on top of having to create two or three lesson plans for each day.

It's a rare person who can do this job well. It's exhausting, and when you add the lack of appreciation of teachers, there's little motivation for a new generation to take on this vital task. In fact, I've been telling our kids since they were born not to become teachers. Now, watching their dad, they've come to the same conclusion.

One reader encapsulated volumes of school reform literature in three sentences:

Why the heapings of scorn on teachers and the unions? One word: performance. Until student performance improves, all deals are off.

The current wave of "school reform" arose with neoliberalism in the 1980s and employs its free market discourse (Compton and Weiner 2008). My perspective on this subject has been shaped by more than 20 years of work experience as a college and high school teacher. In the 1990s, I completed a long and expensive doctoral program in political science at Columbia University. Twenty years earlier, I would have been virtually assured of a career as a college professor. By the time I entered the job market, however, there was an oversupply of PhDs, and universities were replacing tenured positions with part-time "adjunct" jobs, some of which I held while I was still completing my doctorate.

I then taught in New York City public high schools for 11 years. My salary and benefits as a unionized teacher enabled me to make payments

on my student loans and still remain in the middle class. Midway through my stint with the public school system, it was put under mayoral control. The city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, chose as schools chancellor a former antitrust prosecutor and corporate lawyer, Joel Klein, whose lack of experience as an educator or schools administrator made him completely unqualified for the job.<sup>2</sup> But there was a method to Bloomberg's madness. The mayor saw the teacher's union as the primary obstacle to "reform," and Klein was well suited by temperament and professional skills to bust it.<sup>3</sup>

The implicit foundation of this antiunion agenda was a chain of reasoning that goes something like this: (1) New York's public schools are failing, (2) ineffective teachers are the single biggest reason for this failure, and (3) the teachers' union is protecting these ineffective teachers and is thus the single biggest obstacle to a quality education for all. Like the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind initiative, which had recently been enacted, Bloomberg's and Klein's school reform agenda was aggressively marketed as a bold plan to raise academic standards for all children. This would end what George W. Bush called the "soft bigotry of low expectations," which supposedly explained the "achievement gap" between affluent white and disadvantaged minority students. This same appeal to racial justice and equality would later characterize the Obama administration's Race to the Top, which made several billion dollars in federal grants and waivers from impossible federal mandates conditional on far-reaching, neoliberal school reform by the states.

The title of Bloomberg's and Klein's plan, "Children First," implied that public schools were failing because education professionals, including teachers' union and school district officials, were putting their own selfish agendas before the needs of the children they served. The ideology of disinterested school reformers rescuing children from the clutches of labor leaders, government bureaucrats, and other entrenched special interests legitimized the mayor's muscular agenda of remaking New

---

2. When Klein left in 2010–2011, Bloomberg appointed the equally unqualified Cathie Black, a publishing executive who lasted less than four months in the job. Klein went on to work for his good friend Rupert Murdoch, whose *New York Post* had supported his union-busting policies with a constant drumbeat of attacks on the United Federation of Teachers. In joining Murdoch's empire, Klein reportedly cashed in his public sector connections to pursue "entrepreneurial ventures that cater to the educational marketplace in which News Corporation could make seed investments" (Stelter and Arango 2010).

3. Bloomberg succeeded in undermining the union, at least for a time, but not in dismantling it. For a review of the mayor's school reform record, see D'Agostino (2009b).

York's public school system in the image of corporate America and the free market economy.

The current attack on teachers and teachers' unions—led by politicians, pundits, and wealthy businessmen across the political spectrum—is predicated on an assumption that is apparently uncontroversial: that American public education as an institution is, in fact, performing badly. School reformers have invested this assumption with a kind of moral authority such that anyone who has a more complex picture of what is actually going on in American schools is immediately suspect of being somehow dishonest or trying to get away with something, of protecting and excusing arrangements that are self-evidently bad.

Armed with this assumption and girded with its moral authority, school reformers press their indictment of public education without having to justify what is in fact a simplistic set of answers to questions that are far from simple and that merit an informed and respectful public dialogue. Further, in any such dialogue, teachers, above all, should have a valued place at the table, much as doctors do in discussions of health care, athletes on sports issues, and so on. And yet teachers in America today find themselves on the defensive, unable to question school reform orthodoxy without raising the suspicion of being self-interested apologists for a dysfunctional status quo. With their credibility impugned from the outset, teachers—the very people who can shed the most light on the real problems in public education—have been very largely shut out of the national discussion about the state and needs of the country's education system.

What, then, is the basis for the widespread and simplistic assumption that America's public schools are failing? In brief, the answer is an alleged decline in standardized test scores over time and the poor performance of America's youth on international comparisons. Yet most of those who actually study the educational testing data in depth and have the statistical expertise to understand it question both the overall picture of poor test scores and the notion that school or teacher quality is the primary causal factor in explaining test scores (Koretz 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Based on a comprehensive review of the available data in the mid-1990s, *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner and Biddle 1995) presented

---

4. In theory, "value-added" models can isolate teacher effectiveness and measure it separately from other factors that affect student test scores, such as class size and prior skill level of students. In practice, these models demonstrate poor statistical validity (McCaffrey et al. 2003) and distort the entire educational process by rewarding those who "teach to the test" (Baker et al. 2010; D'Agustino 2012c; Rothstein 2010, 2011). In addition, as discussed in Chapter 7, by pitting teacher against teacher, they undermine the very culture of collaboration needed to improve public education.



a scathing critique of the “failing public schools” picture, arguing that most of the decline in test scores could be attributed to an influx of low-performing students into the pool of those taking the tests. The authors also made the case that the international data were misleading because they could not adequately take into consideration differences in national curricula and other factors that complicate such comparisons. More recently, an analysis of New York City data called into question Michael Bloomberg’s claim that the city’s public schools were in decline before he took the helm as mayor (Brennan 2009).

The context of such research was the neoliberal attack on public education, which proved impervious to reasoned discussion. Experts who questioned the school reformers’ interpretation of educational testing data were widely criticized for being complacent about the state of America’s schools (Berliner and Biddle 1996; Stedman 1996a, 1996b). Such criticism showed the circular reasoning and ideological nature of school reform orthodoxy—“test data tell us that public schools are failing, and if anyone thinks the data tell us something else, that only shows they’re in denial that public schools are failing.”

In reality, the statistical evidence raises complex questions that merit open-minded and informed public discussion (Koretz 2008). However, such discussion would not serve the purpose of neoliberal reformers, who have little interest in understanding the real problems confronting schools but are hell-bent on remaking public education in the image of free market capitalism.

## **SCHOOL REFORM AND ECONOMIC STAGNATION**

The climate of public hostility in which American teachers and teachers’ unions find themselves today is rooted in nearly three decades of public policy. The current wave of school reform in America was launched in 1983, when a presidential commission of corporate, government, and education elites concluded that the country’s education system was failing to produce a competitive workforce. “A Nation At Risk,” the commission’s famous report, warned that “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” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983).

The main evidence cited in support of this somber conclusion was an alleged drop in SAT scores between 1963 and 1980<sup>5</sup> and America's relatively poor performance on international tests. The commission's recommendations included "higher standards," better teachers, and "performance-based" teacher salaries. This same agenda has pervaded the education policies of all presidents, Republican and Democratic, from the 1980s through the Obama administration. It was and is echoed by corporate elites, politicians at every level of government, and local school boards. Compton and Weiner (2008) have shown that this movement in the United States is part of a broader neoliberal attack on teachers and teachers' unions occurring worldwide. They document the forms it is taking in different countries and the various ways teachers are fighting back.

Student test scores are central to the school reform movement in two ways. First, school reformers cite poor performance on international tests<sup>6</sup> as evidence of a crisis in American public education. Second, standardized tests—especially state reading and math tests—provide the data school reformers use in evaluating the success of both educational reform policies and individual teachers, administrators, and schools. In Chapter 7, I discuss why standardized test scores are not an adequate basis either for diagnosing what is wrong with public education or for creating better schools (see also D'Agostino 2012c). In this section, I limit myself to the question of whether public school performance, as measured by standardized tests, can be a relevant measure of how well prepared the country's youth are to be productive in workplaces when they leave school.

School reformers typically misconstrue the training deficits that confront American employers, most of whom are satisfied with most of their employees' traditional academic skills (National Center on Education and the Economy 1990). Employers who say they cannot find enough qualified workers are typically referring to something other than academic rigor. First, there are not enough job applicants with the specific

---

5. The "Sandia Report" later showed that the commission's finding of declining SAT scores was based on faulty statistical analysis. One of the report's authors told a journalist that it was suppressed by the Reagan administration's Department of Education, which had appointed the commission (Miller 1991). This is consistent with the obscurity of the report for nearly ten years; it was published only in 1993 in the May/June issue of the *Journal of Educational Research*.

6. Two widely cited international tests are the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Program for International Student Assessment (U.S. Department of Education 2011). Ironically, one of the main reasons for lackluster U.S. performance on these tests, aside from the high incidence of child poverty in the United States and inequitable funding of schools, is the country's preoccupation with "hard data" provided by multiple-choice tests. The most academically successful countries, by contrast, routinely employ holistic assessments, such as open-ended essay questions (Darling-Hammond 2010).

technical training needed in emerging industries. Successful European and Asian countries provide such training through free, government-run technical schools and retraining programs (National Center on Education and the Economy 1990), a solution shunned by American free market ideologues.

Second, there is a shortage of workers who can analyze needs and formulate and creatively solve problems, both independently and in collaboration with coworkers. These higher-order cognitive and social skills are cultivated by schools that feature learning teams and inquiry and project-based instruction. While such schools are the norm in highly industrialized foreign countries (Darling-Hammond 2010), they are ironically neglected (or even attacked) in the United States by school reformers preoccupied with multiple choice test data. To be sure, American school reformers do recognize that good jobs in the twenty-first century require higher-order skills, but they do not support the kind of schools that produce such outcomes because that type of school does not fit the reformers' notion of academic rigor (Meier 2009).

In summary, America is not faltering economically because of a shortage of rigorously educated workers. While it is true that the most successful European and Asian countries produce a larger proportion of college graduates than the United States (Darling-Hammond 2010), millions of the college graduates whom the United States does produce cannot find employment requiring their level of education (Matgouranis 2010). American corporations are outsourcing engineering and other skilled jobs to China and India not because there is a shortage of qualified Americans to do these jobs but because there are qualified foreigners who will do them for lower pay. Under these circumstances, graduating more engineers will not result in more wealth being produced in the United States; it will only lower the salaries of American engineers. While lower labor costs are in the short-term interest of corporations and their owners, it is not in the public interest to invest in human capital only to have it remain idle.

I am far from suggesting that the United States should provide less education for its people. My point is that corporate elites and rich investors who blame American education for the country's economic malaise are diverting attention, whether consciously or not, from their own responsibility for that malaise. Were these same elites and investors to build factories in the United States and provide industrial engineers with good salaries and benefits, more young people would want to go into engineering, and schools would turn out more engineers. Similarly, if America's ruling elites consented to pay the taxes needed to properly

maintain roads, waterworks, and other public infrastructure from which they benefit, the resulting work opportunities in civil engineering would motivate more students to enter that field.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the low-wage strategy of American neoliberal managers and fiscal neglect of public infrastructure depress the job market for engineers in the United States, providing no incentive for students to enter the field or for universities to train them.

The limiting factor for America's production of wealth is not a shortage of highly educated people reflecting an alleged deficiency of public education. Rather, these factors include the exporting of capital by corporations seeking cheaper labor abroad, the squandering of human resources and physical capital on unproductive military programs, the unwillingness of rich investors to forgo high short-term profits in order to invest in increased productivity, and the unwillingness of rich taxpayers to invest adequately in the country's public infrastructure. The scapegoating of schools and teachers for America's economic decline is one way that the country's irresponsible ruling elites maintain their power, even as their policies batter the middle class and the poor.

To be sure, some proponents of school reform also have a critical perspective on U.S. corporate policies. The report *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages* criticized most U.S. businesses for neglecting long-term investment in training their personnel for high-productivity systems, partly because of pressures from Wall Street for short-term profits and partly because of attachment to an obsolete, assembly-line paradigm of work organization (National Center on Education and the Economy 1990). The report also argues that the United States is not adequately committed to training non-college-bound youth (and to retraining unemployed workers) for emerging industries, in contrast with Germany, Japan, Sweden, and Denmark. I agree with all these points.

A more recent report by the same organization, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, deals more extensively with America's educational system, arguing that it is not preparing our youth for "high-value-added" jobs in such fields as research and development, design, marketing and sales, and global supply chain management (National Center on Education and the Economy 2007). The report contains many valid ideas, especially on

---

7. This assumes that political elites do not undercut American engineers when they do act to maintain infrastructure. In a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of neoliberalism, however, New York City recently awarded a contract for repairing the Alexander Hamilton Bridge to a subsidiary of China State Construction Engineering Company (Semple 2011).

the need to replace local funding of schools with equitable state funding<sup>8</sup> and to reorient curricula from multiple-choice tests toward project-based assessments that value creativity. But the underlying assumption of this report, as with its predecessor, is that formal training and education are the limiting factors in America's economic performance. Both reports are remarkably silent about fundamental causes, especially the militarist and neoliberal policies that deprive the civilian economy of capital and well-paid jobs.

Robotic manufacturing is conspicuously absent from the list of high-value-added jobs in *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, a prime example of the postindustrial fallacy that the United States no longer has a comparative advantage in manufacturing and must now base its prosperity on services. In reality, as discussed in Chapter 2, services depend on equipment and other manufactured goods both directly (e.g., computers, office supplies, and telecommunications equipment) and indirectly (e.g., to construct and maintain facilities and generate needed electricity). All these machines and materials need to be manufactured, and the United States cannot correct its trade deficits unless most of this manufacturing is done domestically.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, human capital is not only developed through formal education or technical training but also arises continually from the interaction of workers with one another and with machines during the process of production in actual workplaces (Rynn 2010). The relocation of production abroad is therefore a fundamental reason for the deterioration of human capital (e.g., production skills and know-how) in the United States. Here, *Tough Choices or Tough Times* inverts cause and effect, arguing that a lack of skilled labor in the United States is driving capital abroad while in fact American corporations are not utilizing the skilled labor that the country already has and, by relocating production abroad, are causing production skills and know-how to atrophy.

---

8. As part of this proposal, the report advocates paying teacher salaries according to state civil service pay scales, with some modification based on merit. It is worth noting that Joel Klein, a member of the commission that produced the report, appended a statement dissenting from this proposal and affirming a more hard line school reform position (Klein 2007). While the report views teachers as highly skilled professionals and does not single out teachers' unions as a threat to quality, Klein was obsessed with breaking the teachers' union in New York City. One of his techniques was to create a budgeting system for schools that gave principals financial incentives to hire lower paid teachers irrespective of merit, consistent with the neoliberal attack on wages discussed in the previous chapter.

9. Further, the same corporate elites who outsourced American manufacturing jobs in search of cheaper labor are now outsourcing computer programming, telephone- and internet-based technical support, and other service jobs.

In summary, the deficiencies of American public education, real or imagined, cannot explain the long-term economic stagnation of the United States and its middle class. I turn now to the other claim of neo-liberal reformers noted previously—that American public schools are failing to provide poor minority children with the educations they need to be successful. This is related to the so-called achievement gap, the persistence of poor academic outcomes for black and Hispanic youth relative to their white and Asian American peers.

## SCHOOL REFORM AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

As noted previously, school reformers present themselves as champions of equal educational opportunities and high expectations for all children regardless of race, class or ethnicity. While affluent families can afford private school tuition, disadvantaged black and Hispanic families depend on publicly funded schools. According to the reformers, traditional public schools are failing to close the educational achievement gap between disadvantaged and affluent children for two reasons (Hess 2006). First, public schools are government monopolies whose staffs have allegedly grown complacent because of a lack of competition. Second, contracts with teachers unions, which provide for tenure (job security) and which base salaries on seniority, allegedly protect incompetent teachers and fail to reward those who excel. This analysis is essentially an application of neoliberal ideology to public education.

The remedy, according to the school reformers, is to remake public education in the image of the competitive free market. This can be accomplished by abolishing tenure, instituting merit pay for teachers, and increasing school choice—that is, setting schools in competition with one another and empowering families to choose the best ones (Hess 2006). Increasing the number of publicly funded but privately managed charter schools (see Appendix 3.1) is a major strategy for expanding school choice. These reforms, according to their proponents, will reward excellent teachers and schools and weed out incompetence. With excellent publicly funded schools, the reformers say, poor minority families will finally have what they need to enter the middle class and prosper.

There is something seriously wrong with this picture. If government monopoly power and teachers' unions make public schools dysfunctional, then why are government-run, unionized public schools in affluent suburban districts doing so well? Why is there no movement in Beverly Hills, say, or Scarsdale to abolish tenure and institute merit pay? Clearly,



the excellence of these schools flies in the face of reformers' theories about the pernicious effects of government power and unions. What, then, accounts for their high-quality programs and good academic outcomes? One factor is obvious—money, plain and simple. The large role of local property taxes in funding public schools in the United States produces a discrepancy in the resources per student available to most affluent suburban schools compared to those in poor rural and urban districts (Adler 2010; Kozol 1991, 2005). These differences in resources affect educational quality in a number of ways but especially class size, a well-established factor affecting academic performance (Class Size Matters 2011; Mishel and Rothstein 2002).<sup>10</sup>

The second major factor is socioeconomic (Koretz 2008). Children in affluent circumstances enjoy a number of key advantages denied to their counterparts struggling with poverty (Duncan and Murnane 2011). They go to school with their material needs met—including nutrition, health care, and freedom from violence—enabling them to focus on academic learning. Their early childhood experience was enriched by educational toys and a home culture in which reading and creative leisure activities such as hobbies played a prominent part. Their parents, typically college educated professionals, speak to them in standard English rich in academic vocabulary and impart the expectation of college and professional success as well as the associated work habits. They have quiet spaces to do homework and the time to do so since they do not have to earn money, provide child care to their siblings, or meet other unmet needs of the family at the expense of their own educational needs. They have attended good schools from the outset and are at or above grade level.

Schools populated with children having all these advantages cannot help but achieve better academic outcomes, on average, than schools serving the rural or urban poor. That would be so even if the former schools did not have smaller class sizes, highly qualified teachers, and all the other advantages that come from greater funding per student.

---

10. W. Norton Grubb (2009) disputes this, arguing that money has little impact on educational quality. While dismissing the importance of class size, Grubb focuses on the fact that teachers in underperforming schools on average spend more time on matters of administration and discipline and less on good pedagogy than teachers in high performing schools. But his assumption that pedagogical practice is independent of class size is unrealistic, indeed absurd to anyone who has actually taught in both kinds of school, as I have. A classroom of 20 high performing students may be very manageable, enabling the teacher to focus on pedagogy, while a classroom of 20 academically and socially-emotionally needy children may be completely unmanageable, making it virtually impossible for even the best teacher to employ the same teaching methods. While the class sizes are the same and the two teachers' practices vary greatly, a competent researcher will not conclude that the former plays no causal role while the latter does.

Compensatory federal and state spending for schools that serve the poor—which justice urgently requires—cannot entirely level the playing field for all children as long as extremes of wealth and poverty create highly unequal material and cultural circumstances for children before they even set foot in school (Duncan and Murnane 2011). The racial and ethnic achievement gap, a poison fruit of deeply entrenched class inequality, can be overcome only by egalitarian economic arrangements in the society as a whole.

Indeed, 10 out of 12 of the countries that outperform the United States on international tests have greater class equality than the United States, in most cases *much* greater.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, there is no easy way to assess the causal contribution to national test averages of this or any other single factor (Koretz 2008), nor is it even clear to what extent these averages are meaningful measures of academic achievement, as the debate between Stedman (1996a, 1996b) and Berliner and Biddle (1995, 1996) attests. But if these international differences mean anything—and school reformers are emphatic that they mean that American public schools are failing—then the data completely demolish the explanations that school reformers give for the alleged failure. Specifically, government monopoly power and teachers' unions cannot account for any academic underperformance that may exist since the countries with higher test averages have government schools much like those in America, most of them unionized. What those countries do not have are America's extremes of wealth and poverty and inequitable funding of public schools.

Given the crippling effects of poverty—which inner-city teachers wrestle with day after day with inadequate resources—the insistence of school reformers on high expectations for poor students is insufficient at best and a cynical diversion from the need for fiscal equity at worst. Public school teachers who work tirelessly to motivate disadvantaged youth do not need school reformers' lectures about high expectations. Nor is the problem that simple. In fact, the school reformers' definition and

---

11. I examined the 2009 scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2010) and recent Gini index data (World Bank 2011), which measures economic inequality within a country on a scale of 0 (complete equality) to 100 (complete inequality). Twelve countries scored significantly higher than the United States on all three scales of PISA (reading, science, and mathematics). Of these, 10 had lower Gini scores than the United States, which had a score of 41. Ranked from most egalitarian to least, these 10 countries with their Gini scores were Japan (25), Finland (27), the Netherlands (31), Korea (32), Belgium (33), Canada (33), Switzerland (34), Australia (35), Estonia (36), and New Zealand (36). Only two countries that outperformed the United States had greater social inequality: Singapore (42) and Hong Kong (43).



measurement of academic achievement in terms of standardized test scores has highly destructive consequences for disadvantaged minority students. Schools forced to close the achievement gap by that measure—which is the thrust of both the Bush and Obama administrations' policies, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top—are forced to substitute pedagogically worthless test preparation, which destroys the love of learning, for authentic education.

Consider, for example, a mathematics course designed to produce the highest possible scores on a standardized test. Such a course cannot devote a significant amount of time to ways of learning or topics that do not improve test scores, such as inquiry-based problems, student-chosen projects, and other activities that tap students' curiosity, cultivate creativity, and lay a foundation for lifelong learning (Lockhart 2009). While all schools face these trade-offs, those in affluent communities with students mostly at or above grade level have far more latitude in designing a curriculum that balances traditional skill building with projects and inquiry-based activities.

By contrast, a school serving disadvantaged students who are mostly below grade level—whether a charter or a traditional public school—must jettison a balanced curriculum that educates the whole person in favor of mind-numbing and spirit-killing test preparation. Such “excellence” is driving tens of thousands of America's best teachers out of the profession and millions of minority youth out of school (Noguera 2008). Most students who stay in such schools emerge permanently scarred with a lifelong hatred of academic learning. Any reader who thinks I am exaggerating needs to spend a single semester inflicting test preparation on disadvantaged children or at least listen—really listen—to the experience of teachers and children forced to endure such “education.”

Authentic education and test preparation have diametrically different, profound, and lifelong effects on the self. A curriculum rich in projects and inquiry-based experiences continually sends children the message that their ideas matter. It cultivates independence of thought and initiative, essential traits of effective problem solvers, autonomous citizens, and authentic leaders. The test-oriented curriculum, by contrast, sends the message that only the test makers' ideas matter. It socializes youth into a culture of mindless conformity and obedience.

To be sure, this kind of authoritarian culture appeals to conventional employers, and for that reason many disadvantaged families struggling to enter the middle class acquiesce in test-oriented schooling or even seek it out. This is perhaps the main reason for the popularity of charter schools. Parents who want their children to succeed and who are

struggling to raise them in neighborhoods afflicted by violence, joblessness, and substance abuse have few alternatives. Just as the hell of boot camp is a gateway to economic security in a military career, the regimented world of test preparation can open doors to regular employment in the private sector or the military itself. And the private sector route does not carry the risk of death or lifelong disability from battlefield injuries.

Young adults who emerge from the test-prep factory into college or private sector workplaces, however, and even those who enter the armed forces can expect little job security. To be sure, the winners at the test-prep game—those who have competed hard, learned to perform academic tasks under the direction of others, and been rewarded by high grades—are well trained to earn college-worthy SAT scores or hold jobs in authoritarian workplaces. Only a small minority, however, will excel at work in liberal arts colleges, which requires such creative and higher-order skills as formulating original topics, identifying relevant sources, and synthesizing diverse information into coherent term papers. Even those who do succeed will not have earned admission to the middle class, only the privilege of competing with millions of other underemployed college graduates for the increasingly scarce, well-paid jobs in corporate America (Matgouranis 2010). Finally, the ones who land these coveted jobs have only a precarious foothold in the middle class; they will never know if or when their job will be outsourced to an equally well educated, lower-paid foreigner.

In summary, the promise that education is a pathway to secure, middle-class prosperity in America today is fraudulent (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Collins 2011). Charter and other test-oriented schools may reduce the racial and ethnic achievement gap as measured by test scores, but they do so at the expense of the creativity and higher-order skills needed to excel in college or to hold well-paid private sector jobs, to the extent anyone can in capitalist America. The training in obedience and conformity provided by these schools prepare the vast majority of disadvantaged students who succeed in them for low-paid jobs or middle class but dangerous and often temporary jobs in the military.

If given a choice, poor parents might well prefer to send their children to schools where they will receive well-rounded educations that foster creativity, independent thought, and a love of learning, even if their test scores will be lower. But in reality, the parents have little choice. Neoliberal reformers like Mayor Michael Bloomberg have begun to shut down every public school in America that cannot or will not meet their demands for higher and higher test scores (Cramer 2011;

Ravitch 2011).<sup>12</sup> In a perversion of language worthy of George Orwell's novel *1984*, this is what neoliberals call "school choice."

Those who champion "high expectations" and are not themselves educators tend to simplistically equate "excellence" with high test scores. Some are well-intentioned social entrepreneurs who have chosen a particular educational option on behalf of the poor without even realizing they have made a choice. Others are cynical architects of a brave new world of capitalist-friendly education. In this world, low-paid, nonunionized teachers are forced to transform the country's youth into docile and disciplined workers for low-paid jobs in corporate America (Compton and Weiner 2008). But the intentions of school reformers matter little as long as they use power and money to dictate what goes on in classrooms.<sup>13</sup> In so doing, they are depriving the black and Hispanic poor of the very choice that they claim to promote, seizing control of neighborhood public schools from their stakeholders. This power grab by school reformers, who are disproportionately white and affluent, bears little resemblance to the civil rights movement in whose mantle they wrap themselves. On the contrary, it is of a piece with the long and painful history of domination that the civil rights movement fought implacably.

## INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM: FANTASY AND REALITY

The bipartisan attack on public education in the United States is part of a larger narrative. Public schools are failing, the reformers say, because they are creatures of government and are beholden to labor unions, two institutions that are dysfunctional in their own right (Hess 2006). Attacks on government and organized labor have been, of course, a hallmark of

---

12. For example, the Bloomberg administration has closed or is in the process of closing dozens of "low-performing" public schools, most of which are located in poor minority neighborhoods, notwithstanding fierce opposition by the schools' stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, and community leaders. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People joined with the United Federation of Teachers in a lawsuit to prevent one round of closings, but the courts sided with the mayor (Cramer 2011). If the schools are truly as dysfunctional as the Bloomberg administration claims, it is hard to understand why so many parents would want their children to attend them and why so many teachers would want to work in them.

13. There are two ways to dictate what goes on in classrooms. One is to micromanage teachers from city hall through a vast bureaucracy, an approach initially tried by Mayor Bloomberg in New York City that failed dismally and was largely abandoned after several years (D'Agostino 2009b). The second approach, which Bloomberg tried next, is management by numbers (D'Agostino 2009b). When teachers can lose their jobs if they do not produce good-enough numbers, they need to orient their teaching to the test, even if that means killing their students' enthusiasm for learning and neglecting those for whom the test is too easy or too hard or who just learn better in ways that are not measured by the test.

One of the most enduring, important lessons of Keynesian economics is that high wages, far from depressing employment as predicted by neo-classical theory, actually help maintain full employment and general prosperity by keeping consumer demand high (Adler 2010). In this regard, the 1935 Wagner Act remains one of the most important legacies of the New Deal. By facilitating the formation of unions and collective bargaining, this legislation helped set in motion more than thirty years of rising wages and benefits, the basis for an era of unprecedented prosperity for ordinary working people. It is no exaggeration to say that unions, with the support of government, created the American middle class as we know it.

Ironically, the American Dream—which was supposed to be accomplished by individual effort and frugality alone—was finally realized for tens of millions of households only with the help of “collectivist” institutions demonized by the right. And capital flight and deindustrialization—results of the unregulated capitalism glorified by the right—are today bringing this era of prosperity to an end. Along with the military industrial complex, these neoliberal policies enable the rich to get richer at the expense of America’s middle class.

But there is more to capitalist ideology than these ideas about collectivism and individualism. Even if “big government” in the past did bring all the benefits enumerated here, some conservatives would argue, how can Americans continue on that path if the country simply cannot afford it? Capitalism may be flawed in all the ways indicated above, and some expansion of government may have been necessary to correct these flaws. But what if the correctives have gone to such an extreme that a major downsizing of government is now needed? And what if the “socialist” alternative to America’s admittedly imperfect economic system is a dysfunctional and unjust cure that is worse than the disease? To these critical issues I now turn.

### **APPENDIX 3.1: WHAT ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS?**

Having autonomy from local school districts and exemption from many regulations, most charter schools are funded by the states and accountable to the states for educational outcomes as measured by test scores. In some cases, such as New York City, local school districts themselves issue charters and grant the same kind of autonomy and accountability as states. Whether chartered by the states or by large urban districts, these schools are typically not unionized (though some are)

and have a longer school day and year. Their teachers are typically less experienced and more likely to lack state certification (Rui and Boe 2012)

While charter schools in theory are not permitted to discriminate against academically needy children, their culture is typically test oriented, and they provide fewer supports for English language learners and other students with special needs. Largely because of this reputation, fewer families of academically needy children apply to charter schools, and those who do are more likely than others to be “counseled out” (encouraged or pressured to leave) by administrators anxious to maintain high school-wide test scores. As a result, charter school enrollments are de facto academically selective (Knopp 2008; Grassroots Education Movement 2010).

Many charter schools receive supplemental funding from private sources. Where local school districts create charter schools, in some cases they give them preferential treatment at the expense of the traditional public schools they administer. New York City, for example, frequently takes scarce building space away from its traditional public schools and allocates it to new charter schools, creating great resentment among parents and staff of the former (Grassroots Education Movement 2010, 2011).

The claim of reformers that charter schools outperform traditional public schools is dubious (Center for Research on Education Outcomes 2009; Renzulli and Roscigno 2011). Even in those instances where charter schools compare favorably with the latter by the criterion of test scores, it is unclear how to interpret that difference. Given that most charter schools have a smaller proportion of academically needy children and in some cases more resources because of private donations and preferential treatment by school districts, some improvement in test scores would be expected independently of school quality. More fundamentally, charter schools are known for teaching to standardized tests, an approach to education that neglects critical thinking skills, development of creativity, and the kind of exciting educational experiences that create lifelong learners. Higher test scores, by themselves, are therefore not an indication of overall school quality.



## References

- Adler, Moshe. 2010. *Economics for the Rest of Us: Debunking the Science That Makes Life Dismal*. New York: New Press. <http://monetary.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/32-page-brochure.pdf>
- Baker, Eva L., Paul E. Barton, Linda Darling-Hammond, Edward Haertel, Helen F. Ladd, Robert L. Linn, Diane Ravitch, Richard Rothstein, Richard J. Shavelson, and Lorrie A. Shepard. 2010. "Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers." Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper #278. [http://epi.3cdn.net/724cd9a1eb91c40ff0\\_hwm6iij90.pdf](http://epi.3cdn.net/724cd9a1eb91c40ff0_hwm6iij90.pdf)
- Baker, Peter. 2010. "Arms Treaty with Russia Headed for Ratification." *New York Times*, December 21. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/22/world/europe/22start.html?scp=6&sq=>
- Berliner, David C. and Bruce J. Biddle. 1995. *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Berliner, David C., and Bruce J. Biddle. 1996. "Making Molehills Out of Molehills: Reply to Lawrence Stedman's Review of 'The Manufactured Crisis.'" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 4, no. 3 (February 26).
- Bowles, Samuel and Howard Gintis. 2011. "Beyond the Educational Frontier: The Great American Dream Freeze," in Richard Arum et al ed., *The Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Brennan, James F. 2009. "New York City Public School Improvement before and after Mayoral Control." In *NYC Schools under Bloomberg and Klein: What Parents, Teachers, and Policymakers Need to Know*, ed. Ravitch et al. New York: Lulu. <http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/nyc-schools-under-bloombergklein-what-parents-teachers-and-policymakers-need-to-know/4970767>
- Center for Research on Education Outcomes. 2009. "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States." [http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf)
- Class Size Matters. 2011. "Research Studies Showing the Benefits of Class Size Reduction." <http://www.classsizematters.org/research-and-links-2>
- Collins, Randall. 2011. "Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification," in Richard Arum et al ed., *The Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Compton, Mary, and Lois Weiner. 2008. *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cramer, Philissa. 2011. "Judge Rejects UFT-NAACP Claims, Allows Co-Locations, Closures." Gotham Schools, July 21. <http://gothamschools.org/2011/07/21/judge-rejects-uft-naacp-claims-allows-co-locations-closures>
- D'Agostino, Brian. 2009b. "Holding Mayor Bloomberg Accountable." NYC Rubber Room Reporter, October 28. <http://nycrubberroomreporter.blogspot.com/2009/10/holding-mayor-bloomberg-accountable-by.html>
- D'Agostino, Brian. 2012b. "Waiting for Superman": Neglecting Children and Scapegoating Teachers. *Journal of Psychohistory*, forthcoming.
- D'Agostino, Brian. 2012c. "Beyond the Welch Paradigm: Why Value Added Assessment is not a Path to Educational Quality." Unpublished paper. Dame, Frederick William. 2001. *History of Switzerland*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. 2010. "Soaring Systems: High Flyers All Have Equitable Funding, Shared Curriculum, and Quality Teaching." *American Educator* 34, no. 4.
- Duncan, Greg J., and Richard J. Murnane. 2011. *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Grassroots Education Movement. 2010. *The Truth about Charter Schools in New York City*. New York: Grassroots Education Movement. [http://www.waitingforsupermantruth.org/?page\\_id=408](http://www.waitingforsupermantruth.org/?page_id=408)
- Grassroots Education Movement. 2011. *The Inconvenient Truth behind Waiting for Superman* (DVD). New York: Grassroots Education Movement and Real Reform Studios Production. <http://www.waitingforsupermantruth.org/>
- Grubb, W. Norton. 2009. *The Money Myth: School Resources, Outcomes, and Equity*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hess, Frederick M. 2006. *Tough Love for Schools: Essays on Competition, Accountability, and Excellence*.
- Klein, Joel I. 2007. *Statement in Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- Knopp, Sarah. 2008. "Charter Schools and the Attack on Public Education." *International Socialist Review*, issue 62, November–December. <http://www.isreview.org/issues/62/feat-charterschools.shtml>
- Koretz, Daniel. 2008. *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Kozol, Jonathan. 1991. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kozol, Jonathan. 2005. *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.
- Krueger, Alan, and Diane Whitmore. 2001. "Would Smaller Class Sizes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?" Princeton University working paper 451.
- Lockhart, Paul. 2009. *Mathematician's Lament: How School Cheats Us Out of Our Most Fascinating and Imaginative Art Form*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press.
- Matgouranis, Christopher. 2010. "The Underemployed College Graduate." Center for College Affordability and Productivity, October 18.  
<http://centerforcollegeaffordability.org/archives/1761>
- McCaffery, Daniel F., J. R. Lockwood, Daniel M. Koretz, and Laura S. Hamilton. 2003. *Evaluating Value-Added Models for Teacher Accountability*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Meier, Deborah. 2009. "New York City Schools: Then and Now." In *NYC Schools Under Bloomberg and Klein: What Parents, Teachers, and Policymakers Need to Know*, ed. Ravitch et al. New York: Lulu. <http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/nyc-schools-under-bloombergklein-what-parents-teachers-and-policymakers-need-to-know/4970767>
- Miller, Julie A. 1991. "Report Questioning 'Crisis' in Education Triggers an Uproar." *Education Week*, October 9. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1991/10/09/06crisis.h11.html>
- Mishel, Lawrence, and Richard Rothstein, eds. 2002. *The Class Size Debate*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- National Center on Education and the Economy. 1990. *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy.
- National Center on Education and the Economy. 2007. *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. 1983. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.  
<http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>
- Noguera, Pedro. 2008. "Making School Matter: Providing Support to At-Risk Students and Reducing the Dropout Rate." Paper presented to the New York State Governor's Summit on Student Engagement and Dropout Prevention, October 10.



- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. 2010. "PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary." <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/60/46619703.pdf>
- Renzulli, Linda A. and Vincent J. Roscigno. 2011. "Charter Schools and the Public Good," in Richard Arum et al ed., *The Structure of Schooling: Readings in the Sociology of Education*. Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage Publishers.
- Rothstein, Jesse. 2010. "Teacher Quality in Educational Production: Tracking, Decay, and Student Achievement." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125, no. 1: 175–214. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14442>
- Rothstein, Jesse. 2011. "Review of 'Learning about Teaching': Initial Findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project." National Education Policy Center. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-learning-about-teaching>
- Rui, Ning and Erling E. Boe. 2012. "Who teaches in American charter schools? Findings from secondary analysis of the 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey." *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 10.
- Rynn, Jon. 2010. *Manufacturing Green Prosperity: The Power to Rebuild the American Middle Class*. New York: Praeger.
- Semple, Kirk. 2011. "Bridge Repairs by a Company Tied to Beijing." *New York Times*, August 10. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/11/nyregion/china-construction-co-involved-in-new-yorks-public-works.html?\\_r=1&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/11/nyregion/china-construction-co-involved-in-new-yorks-public-works.html?_r=1&emc=eta1)
- Stedman, Lawrence C. 1996a. "Respecting the Evidence: The Achievement Crisis Remains Real." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 4, no. 7 (April 4).
- Stedman, Lawrence C. 1996b. "Review of 'The Manufactured Crisis.'" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 4, no. 1 (January 23).
- Stelter, Brian, and Tim Arango. 2010. "News Corp. Reels in a Top Educator." *New York Times*, November 9. <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/news-corp-reels-in-a-top-educator>
- U.S. Department of Education. 2011. "Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, International Activities Program." <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international>
- World Bank. 2011. "Gini Index." <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>