

Chapter 2

Why Government Schools Fail

Extensive empirical research shows not one but eight root causes of government school failure, all of them institutional in nature and fiercely resistant to reform efforts. Each is a flaw in the current way schools are organized, funded, and managed—flaws that could be remedied through market-based reforms.

LACK OF COMPETITION

According to Minnesota school reform expert Ted Kolderie, “education has not had to innovate in order to survive,” and “like any managers comfortable in a cartel, [educators] cling tightly to the traditional ‘givens’ of their system.”¹ Competition for students among government schools is limited, and their revenues from state and local taxes are given largely without regard to their success or failure at providing high-quality results. Private schools, in contrast, survive because their customers (parents) find them sufficiently appealing to be worth the cost of tuition.

¹Quoted in Herbert J. Walberg et al., *We Can Rescue Our Children: The Cure for Chicago's Public School Crisis* (Chicago: The Heartland Institute, 1988), 61.

How do government school superintendents choose the type of instruction to offer? Possible types of instruction include activity-based, Afrocentrist, integrationist, constructivist, core curriculum, child-centered, direct instruction, classical curriculum, Montessori, multiculturalist, open education, progressive, and traditional, among others. The nonchoice political model suggests all children are taught according to the preferences of 51 percent of educators, taxpayers, or parents—a bad deal for the other 49 percent. But even this vastly understates the problem.

It is not 51 percent of parents who get to decide, but perhaps as few as 51 percent of the small fraction (often less than a fifth) of adults who decide to vote; and not even they, but the candidates who get elected by them; and still not they, but the majority of school board members, who may or may not represent the interests of voters and children. And how important are school boards? Less, perhaps, than the unelected superintendent who prepares the budget and negotiates with the school staff; certainly less than the skilled and experienced union officials who claim to speak for all teachers. Somewhere down this tortuous road of collective decision making and delegation, the wishes of individual parents fall by the wayside.

John Chubb and Terry Moe clearly saw the link between the absence of competition and unrepresented parental interests in a politically managed school system when they wrote, “Lacking feasible exit options, then, whether through residential mobility or escape into the private sector, many parents and students will ‘choose’ a public school despite dissatisfaction with its goals, methods, personnel, and performance. Having done so, they have a right to try to remedy the situation through the democratic control structure. But everyone else has the same right, and the determinants of political power are stacked against them. Democracy cannot remedy the mismatch between what parents and students want and what the public schools provide. Conflict and disharmony are built into the system.”²

²John Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1990), 34.

INEFFECTUAL SCHOOL BOARDS

No commercial enterprise as large or as complex as government schools chooses to be governed by squabbling boards of directors composed of individuals with little relevant experience or training. The elected school board may be a wholesome experiment in democracy and a training ground for individuals who go on to become state and national elected officials, but as managers of enterprises often involving thousands of employees and millions of dollars in facilities and equipment, they are amateurs and no match for well-organized special interests, particularly teachers unions.

Many school board members are honest, intelligent individuals who devote countless hours to public service. Nothing said here is intended to cast doubt on their dedication or integrity. Yet few have extensive board, business, or education experience. Indeed, the best and brightest may be right to resist calls to give such thankless and nearly impossible service to their communities. Serving limited terms with little or no pay or staff support, denied access to accurate information about achievement and productivity, and hobbled with federal and state mandates and union contracts that dictate most important decisions, the typical school board member's task is unenviable.

Because serving on a school board offers little opportunity to genuinely improve schools, these boards tend to be dominated by people who serve for reasons that may have little to do with managing schools for maximum productivity. They focus their attention on personnel and ideological issues rather than the much tougher matter of whether the schools are achieving results.³ Assessing learning progress requires some mastery of educational productivity research, psychometrics, and statistics, just as assessing the performance of a firm requires accounting and other

³"Reforms that promise to create controversy on the board are buried. As mentioned previously, boards tend to work around reforms that would provoke conflict." Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1999), 75.

skills. Few school board members have such skills or any incentive to acquire them. As a result, those who serve are easily led and misled by those who do have these skills: the permanent bureaucracy of school administrators and teachers union negotiators.

Government school administrators, teachers, and other staff represent a major voting bloc, especially in districts where few citizens vote in school board elections. They also contribute campaign funds and volunteers for local elected officials. As a result, local school boards around the country are thoroughly cowed by teachers unions and unable to represent children's interests.⁴

Historically, school boards did not resist teacher unionization or collective bargaining. Today, in deference to the unions, school boards "show no preference for applicants [for teaching positions] who have strong academic records. . . . Public schools are no more likely to hire these candidates than those with far weaker academic records."⁵ As a result, better teachers go unrewarded for their accomplishments, unlike most professionals and workers in the private sector.⁶ The National Association of School Boards adopts positions that are largely indistinguishable from those of unions, including calling for more funding and opposition to choice of schools by parents.⁷

These circumstances help explain why many school boards endorse such fads as whole language, authentic tests, Ebonics, and bilingual education—the success of which remains undemonstrated in randomized experiments or statistically controlled research. Championing such dubious causes when they are new allows school board members to gain reputations for being innovative and on the cutting edge, a useful claim when running for board chair, mayor, or state representative. There is little chance these board members will still be serving when the disappointing results

⁴Chester E. Finn Jr., "Blindspots on the Right," *National Review*, 1995.

⁵Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky, *Teacher Pay and Teacher Quality* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 1997), 164.

⁶Myron Lieberman, *Public Education: An Autopsy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 61–66.

⁷George Clowes, "The Empire Strikes Back," *School Reform News* 2, no. 9 (November 1998): 1, 4.

of the fad come in—if, that is, the bureaucracy even allows the disappointing results to be known.

UNION OPPOSITION TO REFORM

Prior to the creation of public-sector unions, teachers and other public employees were sometimes victimized by politicians seeking to use them in their campaigns or to plunder them for kickbacks and other corrupt purposes. Teachers, not concerned parents or idealistic elected officials, led the movement for government schooling in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century and were later instrumental in the government takeover of private schools in England.⁸

But teachers union leaders have strayed from their original and possibly noble purposes. Once manipulated by politics, they are now the manipulators, exerting inordinate influence over elected officials through campaign contributions, in-kind donations of labor to political campaigns, manipulation of press coverage of school activities, and advertising campaigns directed toward parents, taxpayers, and voters.

Teachers, principals, and school administrators often pursue excellence or community service even if they are not financially rewarded for doing so, but teachers union leaders often act selfishly to maximize their own status and their incomes and to minimize their effort. In a proper institutional setting, these two natural and healthy tendencies are not at odds with one another, but are reinforcing. That is plainly not the case in government schools. Charles Sykes, a senior fellow at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, says, "In some states, the teachers union has become the functional equivalent of a political

⁸Edwin G. West, "The Political Economy of Public School Legislation," *Journal of Law and Economics* 10 (1967): 101–28; Edwin G. West, *Education and the State* (London: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 1965); Joel Spring, "The Evolving Political Structure of American Schooling," in *The Public School Monopoly: A Critical Analysis of Education and the State in American Society*, ed. Robert B. Everhard (San Francisco: Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research, 1982).

party, assuming many of the roles—candidate recruitment, fund-raising, phone-banks, polling, get-out-the-vote efforts—that were once handled by traditional party organizations. The result in many states is that the legislatures, no less than the educational bureaucracies, function as wholly owned subsidiaries of the teachers union.”⁹

Myron Lieberman, a former teachers union leader, has devoted much of his professional career to researching the two largest teachers unions in the United States, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).¹⁰ He finds them to be among the most powerful and sophisticated interest groups in the nation. They enroll more than three million members whose dues exceed one billion dollars annually. They employ more political operatives than the Democratic and Republican parties combined. Their delegations at the 1996 Democratic convention—405 representatives—were larger than all state delegations except that of California. More than 3,000 NEA and AFT staff officials earn more than \$100,000 a year in salary and benefits.

The effect of teachers union power on student achievement has been carefully studied by University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman.¹¹ His state-by-state study of the period of greatest decline in student test scores, 1972–1981, showed the decline was deepest in those states whose legislatures were most responsive to teachers unions and where the AFT (the more aggressive of the two unions at the time) scored its earliest success. In the 1980s, Peltzman found “an unambiguously negative association of union growth and school performance.”

Peltzman’s more recent research shows the decline of student achievement following unionization is usually statewide, even though unions were established in rural schools later and are typ-

⁹Charles J. Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 230.

¹⁰Myron Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 25.

¹¹Sam Peltzman, “The Political Economy of the Decline of American Public Education,” *Journal of Law and Economics* (April 1993): 331–70.

ically weaker there.¹² This suggests teachers unions exercise their primary effects on the policymaking process in state capitols rather than within individual districts and schools.

Union leaders understand the threat to their monopoly privileges posed by educational choice programs, and they have been effective in opposing them. When Pepsi-Cola in 1995 tried to support local private schools in Jersey City, New Jersey, for example, teachers unions vandalized their vending machines and launched a boycott of Pepsi products. Eventually, Pepsi backed down.¹³

In California in 1993, teachers unions pulled out all stops to oppose Proposition 174, the Parental Choice in Education Initiative. California Teachers Association employees threatened and harassed both signature gatherers and voters attempting to sign the petitions, made extensive and illegal use of government-school resources to oppose the initiative, and even offered to bribe a petition expert to keep him from helping the petition drive.¹⁴ The unions and their various fronts outspent prochoice forces ten to one. Not surprisingly, the initiative failed.

Unions continue their opposition to school choice. Before the U.S. Supreme Court in February 2002, AFT and NEA attorneys opposed the pleadings of poor inner-city Cleveland minority parents who were receiving vouchers to send their children to private schools. The Court's ruling in favor of vouchers in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* was a historic victory for parents and defeat for the unions.

Because they perceive it threatens their own job security, teachers union leaders uniformly and adamantly oppose contracting out—allowing competitive bidding by private contractors to provide services such as transportation and food services—even

¹²Sam Peltzman, "Political Economy of Public Education: Non-College Bound Students," Working Paper #108, Center for the Study of Economy and the State, University of Chicago, February 1995.

¹³Owen Hatteras, "Pepsi and the Unchoice for Education," *Report Card* 1, no. 6 (November/December 1995).

¹⁴See David Harmer, *School Choice: Why We Need It, How We Get It* (Salt Lake City: Northwest Publishing, Inc., 1993).

when it could save schools considerable sums.¹⁵ Such opposition has been effective: Empirical research shows the strength of public-sector unions is an important factor in determining whether U.S. county governments contract for goods and services.¹⁶

Teachers union leaders, long admired by parents and the general public, are facing a scrutiny long overdue. A recent cover article in *U.S. News and World Report* called teachers unions “the single most influential force in government education” and leveled charges rarely seen in the popular press: “Union policies that work against quality teaching are driving many top teachers out of public schools, making it tougher for good teachers who stay to do their best work and leaving incompetents entrenched in many classrooms. And at a time when corporate leaders and others are calling on schools to hold students to significantly higher standards, the intransigence of the unions has slowed the pace of school reforms, eroding public confidence in the schools and spurring an unprecedented wave of tuition-voucher plans and similarly targeted initiatives.”¹⁷

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Government school employees operate in an institutional setting rife with conflicts of interest. Superintendents set standards, make policy, and propose budgets, while at the same time they are responsible for delivering the service: hiring and managing the teachers, choosing and maintaining the facilities, and so on. They face powerful incentives to set low academic standards to make them easier to reach, to raise the budget to avoid difficult negotiations with teachers unions, to defer maintenance of facilities

¹⁵Albert Foer, “Contract-Free Education,” *Technos Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (summer 1997): 27–28.

¹⁶Floriencio Lopez-de-Salanes, Andrei Shleifer, and Robert W. Bodjmu, “Privatization in the United States,” NBER Working Paper #5113, Cambridge, Mass., National Bureau of Economic Research, 1995.

¹⁷Thomas Toch et al., “Why Teachers Don’t Teach,” *U.S. News and World Report*, February 1996.

because this will be little noticed during their brief tenures, and to make countless other decisions that contradict the goals of efficiency and excellence.

One conflict of interest that is easy to understand concerns how superintendents are compensated. Often paid according to the number of people who report to them, they face strong temptations to expand the size of their staffs of administrators and teachers. But unless superintendents are truly misinformed, they know that larger districts and larger schools adversely affect student achievement by making it less likely students receive the attention they need to excel.¹⁸ Most government school managers would prefer to work in smaller schools; they know intuitively what the data confirm.¹⁹

The plight of district superintendents is made worse by the local bargaining unit of the state teachers union. One of the few things threatening a superintendent's job security is a dissatisfied teachers union leader. A dissatisfied union steward can leak to the school board information that contradicts the superintendent's reports, leading to embarrassment and conflict with the board. A teachers' strike can lead to termination. The superintendent is torn between serving parents and taxpayers and appeasing union leaders.

The position of government school principals is also tenuous. The lack of a coordinated curriculum in combination with inconsistent assessment methods makes it almost impossible to accurately assess the performance of their staffs. Even if the principals could make such distinctions, a complex and detailed collective-bargaining agreement severely limits their managerial prerogatives. Merit pay to reward and retain outstanding teachers is strictly off-limits in nearly all government school systems.

¹⁸Herbert Walberg, "Losing Local Control of Education: Cost and Quality Implications," Heartland Policy Study #59, Chicago, The Heartland Institute, November 1993.

¹⁹Joseph Bast, an author of this book, held a series of interviews with the superintendents of large school districts in Illinois, during which they often said they would rather work in small schools where they knew the names of the students than in the large and impersonal bureaucracies into which their careers had taken them.

Terminating an incompetent teacher often requires two or more years and costs \$50,000 or more.²⁰

Not surprisingly, many principals try to work around, rather than replace, incompetent staff. Sometimes, this puts students at grave risk. Some 15 percent of students are sexually abused by a teacher or staff member during their elementary and secondary school years.²¹ One study of 225 such cases found that only 1 percent of the cases resulted in an attempt to revoke the abuser's teaching license.²² Often, the sexual predators were simply assigned to a different school.

Principals are responsible for managing government schools, but is it fair to blame them for misleading school board members, who come and go and have little at stake in the fate of the schools? Who will come to their defense when they make tough decisions? How can they even know what decisions are the right ones when they have little systematic information about their costs and results?

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

Political systems rely on rules and bureaucracy to coordinate countless acts of production and consumption.²³ Each layer of government or bureaucracy attempts to restrict the range of discretionary decision making by members of the layer below it by imposing rules, requiring reports, and naming oversight committees. The more complex the service, the more costly, complicated, and detailed become the rules and bureaucracies needed to oversee it.

Schools are complex enterprises indeed. Next to parenting, what takes place in a classroom between teacher and student may

²⁰Thomas C. Dawson, "State Trails Nation in Teaching Reforms, but Not in Teacher Pay," *School Reform News* (January 2001).

²¹"Sex Offenders: Passing the Trash," *The Economist*, 6 April 2002, 27. This article cites a forthcoming book by Charol Shakeshaft, a professor at Hofstra University.

²²Ibid.

²³James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 363ff.

be the most subtle and difficult-to-evaluate relationship between adults and children in contemporary society. Each effort to impose political management on what occurs in classrooms results in a maze of mandates, categorical aid programs, political and regulatory oversight agencies, and conflicting and unnecessary restraints on school-site personnel, until “virtually everything of consequence is either forbidden or compulsory.”²⁴

Federal officials usurp state and local autonomy and reduce efficiency by directing the annual spending of many billions of dollars for categorical or compensatory programs to remedy various social and individual ills. In theory, these funds go to small, special classes and services for children categorized as poor, migrant, bilingual, racially segregated, or psychologically impeded. In practice, the programs have created special producer interests and huge bureaucracies at the federal, state, and local levels.

These categorical programs have little foundation in research. Studies show they are ineffective and, in some cases, even harmful.²⁵ Teachers, parents, and peers have low expectations of students stigmatized as mildly mentally retarded and learning disabled—and so do the students themselves. Despite increased costs and administrative complications of categorical programs, evaluations over the last several decades show that such students are often spuriously categorized. Even those appropriately categorized often learn less in segregated special classes than they would in regular classrooms.

Spending on such programs increases inexorably, regardless of which political party holds the majority in Congress or occupies the White House. The result is bureaucracy and complex, conflicting, and constantly changing regulations. Educators serve many masters in central offices, statehouses, and Washington. They are pressured to neglect their central objective: children’s learning.

²⁴Christopher Jencks, “Education Vouchers: A Proposal for Diversity and Choice,” in *Educational Vouchers: Concepts and Controversies*, ed. George R. La Noue (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1972), 50–51.

²⁵Gregory A. Fossedal, “Help for Schools? Try Deregulation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 1996, sec. 1.

To implement the mandates handed down by federal, state, and local political bodies, government schools are forced to rely on inflexible and increasingly complex rules and regulations enforced by a growing bureaucracy. Such a system is inimical to the characteristics of effective schools, which include “an academic focus, a strong educational leader, a sharing of decision-making, a high level of professionalism and cooperation among teachers, and respect for discipline among students.”²⁶ Using data from the High School and Beyond national survey of school organization and student achievement, John Chubb and Terry Moe showed these characteristics are significant factors explaining student achievement. Government schools are less likely than private schools to have these attributes.²⁷

LACK OF STANDARDS

Unlike most countries, the United States lacks well-defined national education goals, curricula, and tests. If schools competed for students by having to convince parents and community leaders they were doing an effective job, the lack of national standards might be only a minor issue. But the absence of clearly defined goals dooms a school system that is managed politically and organized as a cartel.

When goods and services delivered by private-sector firms are expensive and difficult for consumers to evaluate, and when the consequences of poor choices are especially costly or pose a threat to health and safety (as in the cases of automobiles, housing, and health care discussed in Chapter 3), private mini-industries have emerged to provide consumers with reliable information; to rate and rank institutions, goods, and services; and to conduct safety and performance tests. *Consumer Reports*, Underwriters Laboratories, and J. D. Power and Associates are three of the most widely recognized firms that help millions of consumers make informed choices.

²⁶Chubb and Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, 136–37.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 127–29.

Once again, things are different in the world of government schools. Because schools need not compete for students or funding, they are under little pressure to provide customers with timely, reliable information about student achievement and other important matters. Tests are frequently changed or renormed every few years, making year-to-year and district-to-district comparisons difficult. Tests may measure student aptitude rather than mastery of subjects taught in the schools; thus the socioeconomic status of a student's family tends to obscure the school's contribution to his or her learning. Conveniently, suburban schools can take credit for scores that would be higher than national averages even if the schools did little more than baby-sit their students whereas inner-city schools can blame poor parents and students for low scores.

Most tests are administered internally by a school's own staff rather than by an independent agency or firm without a stake in the test results. A school's teachers and administrators face obvious incentives to influence test results to inflate student achievement. Opportunities to cheat range from outright corruption (distributing questions and answers before the exams are administered) to more subtle but unethical subterfuges (such as encouraging the brightest students to take the tests and excluding slower students from participating).

Another way schools seek to avoid the accountability created by performance standards and objective assessments is to oppose standardized multiple-choice tests, long the accepted way to objectively measure student performance. Efforts are underway across the country to replace multiple-choice tests with so-called authentic tests, which consist of examinations that require recalled or constructed responses, as in essay questions, rather than a choice of correct answers among alternatives, as in standardized multiple-choice tests. Examples of authentic tests are oral examinations, laboratory exercises in science, musical and other performance exhibitions, and art and writing portfolios. Such tests are hardly new: They have worked well in classrooms for decades if not centuries. What is new is proposing to use them as data for school comparison, assessment, and accountability purposes.

Multiple-choice tests are well suited for large-scale assessment. They are objective, reliable, valid, cheap, and difficult to corrupt. They can widely sample students' knowledge of 60 ideas in as many minutes, whereas an essay examination may sample only one or two ideas in the same length of time. Multiple-choice tests can be made very difficult, as in two- and three-step mathematics and science items. For these reasons, multiple-choice tests are most often employed in selection for universities, graduate, and professional schools, for employment, and for professional licensure in law, medicine, and other fields.²⁸

Authentic tests, by contrast, are far more expensive and rarely meet technical standards. Their validity is easily compromised because a few essay questions or laboratory exercises are readily leaked. Zealous parents can also help their children construct art, writing, and science portfolios done at home.

These problems have long been known, and common sense would rule against the use of such examinations in large-scale assessments, particularly without small-scale trial assessments. Nonetheless, it took very expensive, statewide trials of such examinations in California, Kentucky, and Vermont to prove what would seem obvious.

Why are so many schools allowed to get away with such scandalous behavior? Because there is little demand for accurate testing data. Parents have little reason to insist on more objective testing because they lack the power to act on the results (short of selling their homes and moving to districts that report better test scores). College admissions officials do not care: They rely heavily on SAT and ACT scores, in part because they know the schools' own tests are unreliable. Employers, who may feel the same, usually do not even ask to see grade transcripts for new hires with high school diplomas.

The absence of standards creates genuine difficulties for teachers. The U.S. system leaves states largely responsible for creating education systems, and states give varying amounts of discretion

²⁸Herbert J. Walberg, Geneva D. Haertel, and Suzanne Gerlach Downie, *Assessment Reform: Challenges and Opportunities* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1994).

to local school boards. In turn, what is taught in classrooms is highly variable, even within the same schools and districts. For these reasons, a teacher in any grade cannot depend on what the teacher in the previous grade has taught. The lack of coordination across grades and subjects is especially harmful to children whose families move, particularly if they are also poor.²⁹

The lack of national standards and objective examinations makes it exceedingly difficult for school boards to assess progress made by districts, schools, and teachers. This makes benchmarking and accountability for results nearly impossible. Elected officials and parents have even less information upon which to base their decisions, although this does not prevent them from voicing their opinions and demanding change. Government schools are left adrift in a sea of meaningless data, blown first this way and then that by fads and political agendas, lacking the navigational instruments they need to set a course for excellence.

CENTRALIZED CONTROL AND FUNDING

The lack of national standards does not mean the governance and funding of government schools have remained decentralized for the past half century. In fact, just the opposite has occurred, and this has led to other kinds of inefficiency.

Local government taxes as a percentage of total school spending fell in the last half century. As their responsibility for funding schools has risen, state governments have sought to exercise greater control over schools by consolidating school districts: The number of school districts in the United States fell 87 percent (from 117,108 to 15,367) between 1940 and 1990.³⁰ The average number of students enrolled in each district increased by more than 1,100 percent, from 217 to 2,637 students. At this writing, New York City has approximately 900 schools operating in a single district.

²⁹Herbert J. Walberg, "Uncompetitive American Schools: Causes and Cures," in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, ed. Diane Ravitch (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1998).

³⁰Herbert J. Walberg, "Losing Local Control."

Shifting responsibility for funding schools up the ladder of federalism—from local governments to states or the federal government—makes it more difficult for parents to “vote with their feet” against ineffective schools, reducing their ability to hold local school officials accountable for results. Student achievement in government K–12 schools is negatively related to the percent of funding derived from state sources,³¹ and states that have centralized school finance and administration the most have seen the biggest falls in student achievement.³² Waste and lack of measurable results are often greatest for programs that rely on federal rather than local funding, such as Title 1 programs and Head Start.³³

The reasons are not difficult to fathom. Larger districts and higher state shares of school funding make local school boards and administrators less accountable to local citizens because they need not justify expenditures as carefully. Projects that would not be worthwhile if they were funded entirely by local taxpayers suddenly become attractive when school boards can say somebody else will pay some or nearly all of the bill. Projects are pursued because they would make a school or school district eligible for matching grants from the state or federal government, regardless of whether they reflect the community’s beliefs about what schools genuinely need to improve learning.

A larger state share of school funding brings with it increased regulation, reporting, bureaucracy, and further distraction from

³¹Caroline Minter Hoxby, “Local Property Tax–Based Funding of Public Schools,” Heartland Policy Study #82, Chicago, The Heartland Institute, 1997; Caroline Minter Hoxby, “What Do America’s ‘Traditional’ Forms of School Choice Teach Us about School Choice Reform?” *Economic Policy Review*, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 4, no. 1 (March 1998): 47–59; Herbert Walberg and William J. Fowler Jr., “Expenditure and Size Efficiencies of Public School Districts,” *Educational Researcher* 16, no. 7 (October 1987): 5–13.

³²Walberg, “Losing Local Control”; Walberg, and Fowler Jr., “Expenditure and Size Efficiencies.” (In note 31 above.)

³³Herbert J. Walberg, “Time to Change Federal Government’s Role in Education,” testimony before the Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, Chicago, The Heartland Institute, 1997; Nina H. Shokraii and Patrick F. Fagan, “After 33 Years and \$30 Billion, Time to Find Out if Head Start Produces Results,” *Backgrounder* (Washington, DC, The Heritage Foundation, 1998).

learning. Much energy goes into the question of who governs: the federal government, the state, the local district, the school's principal, its teachers, or its concerned parents. It is nearly impossible to assign responsibility for results.

Centralization also means that mistakes, when they occur, affect many more children and take longer to correct. California's tie for last place in recent reading assessments may be attributable to its disastrous adoption of whole-language instruction, a mistake spread statewide and perpetuated by a highly centralized funding and decision-making system.³⁴

With district consolidation and state funding came a dramatic increase in the average enrollment of government schools. In the past half century, average enrollment per school in the United States multiplied by a factor of five.³⁵ In 1996, 70 percent of high school students attended schools that had enrollments greater than 1,000, and nearly half attended schools with enrollments of more than 1,500.³⁶

Students and parents have paid a high price for bigger schools. Large schools tend to be more bureaucratic, impersonal, and less humane, and research shows they result in lower student achievement.³⁷ Large middle schools and junior high schools tend to departmentalize and employ specialized teachers and ancillary staff who confine themselves to their specialties rather than imparting broad knowledge. These teachers have fewer opportunities to know their students than teachers who have the same students for most subjects for nearly the whole day.

The late University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman, writing in 1961, warned that increasing the size of high schools during a period of declining respect for adult authority would allow the culture of adolescent society—which values such things as personal appearance, clothes, athletics, and attractiveness to

³⁴V. Dion Hayes, "In Blast from Past, California Schools Plan to Re-embrace Phonics," *Chicago Tribune*, 10 May 1996, sec. 1, 8.

³⁵Walberg and Fowler Jr., "Expenditure and Size Efficiencies." (In note 31 above.)

³⁶Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 458.

³⁷Walberg and Fowler Jr., "Expenditure and Size Efficiencies." (In note 31 above.)

the opposite sex and tends to be dismissive toward academic achievement and self-control—to set the tone in many of the nation's schools.³⁸ History has validated his prediction. Diane Ravitch, writing three decades later, says “large schools may have worked well enough when adult authority was intact and educators set the tone, but they became dysfunctional when adult authority dissipated in the late 1960s and early 1970s.”³⁹

ANTIACADEMIC CLASSROOM INCENTIVES

In many middle schools and high schools, students face intense pressure not to study hard. Students view studying as work, and they naturally want to reduce the amount of work required to get passing grades. Because students are generally graded on a curve, the majority of students pressure the highest-achieving students to keep their scores down. The result was described by James Coleman: “[I]n middle schools and high schools, across the socioeconomic spectrum and among all racial and ethnic groups, the informal norms that develop among students are not norms that extol achievement, but are norms that scorn effort, and reward scholastic achievement only when it appears to be done without effort. . . . It is a mark of incorrect organizational design that such norms exist in schools.”⁴⁰

Few teachers are prepared to challenge the adolescent culture. TheodoreSizer, Chester Finn, and others observe that teachers are asked to set standards as well as push students to reach them.⁴¹ Setting high standards creates more work for teachers, means asking students to work harder, and requires that substan-

³⁸James Coleman, *The Adolescent Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1961).

³⁹Ravitch, *Left Back*.

⁴⁰James S. Coleman, “Achievement Oriented School Design,” paper prepared for the Social Organization of Schools conference held at the Center for Continuing Education at the University of Notre Dame, 19 March 1994, 10.

⁴¹TheodoreSizer, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

Chester E. Finn Jr., *We Must Take Charge* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

dard results be reported to parents and principals. Teachers are tempted to offer students lower standards in exchange for orderly conduct in classes and to avoid unpleasant confrontations with students, principals, and parents. All sides win (but only in the short run) in what Finn called “this unholy marriage of low expectation and high marks.”⁴²

Parents are often unable to intervene because they are not told their children are taking easy courses or could achieve more if they applied themselves. Students have little incentive to admit this because doing so would increase their workloads. Principals rarely intervene because popular teachers with an easy rapport with students may have more orderly classrooms and are less likely to generate complaints from parents. Guidance counselors receive positive feedback when students maintain high grade-point averages, but negative feedback when students take challenging courses in which it is difficult to get high grades.

Students stand to lose the most and appear to be most aware of these problems. A 1996 Public Agenda national survey of high school students showed:

- Three-fourths of the students surveyed believe stiffer examinations and graduation requirements would make students pay more attention to their studies.
- Three-fourths also said students should not graduate if they have not mastered English, and a similar percentage said schools should promote only students who master the material presented in their classes.
- Almost two-thirds reported they could do much better in school if they tried.
- Nearly 80 percent said students would learn more if schools made sure they were on time and did their homework.
- More than 70 percent said schools should require after-school classes for those earning Ds and Fs.⁴³

⁴²Finn Jr., *We Must Take Charge*, 106. (In note 41 above.)

⁴³Jean Johnson and Steve Farkas with Ali Bers, *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think about Their Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The eight flaws of government schools grew steadily worse during the last half century as citizens lost local control, as school governance and management centralized in large districts and at the state and federal levels, and as public educators were led to feel indifferent to their customers' needs and desires. The result is a stagnant bureaucratic system that delivers less than mediocre results at high and rising costs and that is dissatisfying to the public, legislators, parents, and students.

As the next several chapters argue, the cure for this dismal situation resides in America's heritage of capitalism and freedom. Privatizing schooling—moving decision making from the public to the private sector—would provide the entrepreneurship, innovation, and productivity so long and sorely needed in the U.S. education system.

RECOMMENDED READING

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