

Reform redux

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That very personal and practical dimension of education was there from the beginning, even though no one wanted to talk about it, much less launch a reform movement in its name. And this individual dimension of schooling has only expanded its scope over the years, becoming larger in the late 19th century and then dominant in the 20th century, as increasingly educational credentials became the ticket of admission for the better jobs. The fact that public schools have long been creatures of politics – established, funded, and governed through the medium of a democratic process – means that they have been under unrelenting pressure to meet consumer demand for the kind of schooling that will help individuals move up, stay up, or at least not drop down in their position in the social order. This pressure is exerted through individual consumer actions, such as by attending school or not, going to this school not that one, enrolling in this program not some other program. It is also exerted by political actions, such as by supporting expansion of educational opportunity and preserving advantage in the midst of wide access.

These actions by consumers and voters have brought about significant changes in the school system, even though these changes have not been the aim of any of the consumers themselves. They have not been acting as reformers with a social cause but as individuals pursuing their own interests through education, so the changes they have produced in schooling by and large have been inadvertent. Yet these unintended effects of consumer action have often derailed or redirected the intended effects of school reformers. They created the comprehensive high school, dethroned social efficiency, pushed vocational education to the margins, and blocked the attack on de facto segregation. Educational consumers may well keep the current school standards

movement from meeting its goals if they feel that standards, testing, and accountability are threatening educational access and educational advantage. They may also pose an impediment to the school choice movement, even though it is being carried out explicitly in their name. For consumers may feel more comfortable tinkering with the system they know than in taking the chance that blowing up this system might produce something that is less suited to serving their needs. In the American system of education, it seems, the consumer – not the reformer – is king.

Footnote

- 1 This lecture was given in September 4, 2009, at the doctoral colloquium on «Schools and Education in Modern Times: Historical Research» at the University of Berne, Switzerland. It draws on my book – *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of American Schooling* – which will be published in the fall of 2010 by Harvard University Press.

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Reform redux

■ Herbert M. Kliebard

There is hardly a more intractable issue in the history of American education than the persistent failure rate of large-scale school reforms. Even when they meet with modest successes, they seem to melt away over time with monotonous regularity. Engaging in reforming schools, as David Labaree notes, is «steady work,» and it is steady work not because the reformers find their endeavors especially promising or rewarding, but because they have left such a lackluster record that they have little recourse but to try again.

Early in his essay, Labaree identifies one of the most crucial obstacles to achieving school reform. It is the intimate and, at least for now, inevitable relationship between politics and educational reform. «We have set our school system for failure,» he says,

«by asking it to fix all of our most pressing problems». Educational reform has become a politically safe but notably ineffective way to address serious social problems. Increasingly, it has become, for all intents and purposes, a convenient election platform. It almost doesn't matter whether the reform succeeds or fails so long as the delusions about educational reform persist.

Why has failure in educational reform become so commonplace? The answer may be simple but difficult to acknowledge. It is that education is manifestly too weak an intervention to achieve urgent social goals. The efforts persist, however, because politicians find it expedient to declare that education can address a grave social problem rather than mustering the will or the political courage to con-

front it head on and with all the seriousness it deserves. It persists also because so many professional educators have been all too eager to agree that education does indeed have the power to address grave problems, if only they are provided with the cash that is needed. Gross income inequality, unresolved issues pertaining to racial and ethnic groups, gender inequality, abject poverty, and drug abuse are all too visible blights on the American landscape, but the amelioration of these social problems will not be accomplished by pretending that educational reform can have critical impact; and certainly not by actually believing it. At best, educational reform can only nibble away at the margins of major social problems.¹

The arguments for staying on the present course, however, are familiar. The relationship between education and earning power, for example, is frequently cited by politicians and educational reformers alike as providing a *prima facie* instance of the material benefits that an education can bestow. To be sure, there is a statistical relationship between years of schooling and lifelong income, but this is not because the educational system has been successfully designed to raise income levels. In all likelihood, the association exists largely because the same individual traits that lead someone to persevere in school are similar to the traits that lead to a better paying job or, as Labaree argues, because of the access that, say, a high school diploma provides, not because the education one actually gets in the course of acquiring that diploma materially affects earning power.

Labaree is understandably skeptical about the widespread view of education as an investment in human capital. There is of course nothing wrong with economists seeing education from that vantage point. Perhaps, however, because economics as a discipline has been so dramatically thrust into public consciousness in recent years, education has begun to be seen almost exclusively that way. It has become out of fashion to think of the benefits of gaining an education in anything but material terms. To be sure, the enormous expansion of the secondary school population in the U.S., beginning in the late nineteenth century has had a positive effect on the American workforce, but, as Labaree argues, that expansion «was not the result of a reform movement.» It was the result mainly of a reaction to key social and demographic changes as the nation became industrialized.

My own view is that urbanization was the most significant of these. As long as the U. S. was primarily a rural nation, population concentrations were not numerous enough to sustain high schools in large numbers. Prior to urbanization, much secondary education had to take place in boarding schools. Once concentrated population centers grew more numerous, it became feasible for large numbers of adolescents to commute to school, and high schools flourished. Only then, as Labaree says, did profes-

sional educators begin to lobby for a major expansion of public education into secondary schooling usually by calling for higher compulsory education laws in the states.

But it is not simply that schools will ultimately fail when undertaking grandiose endeavors. It is that the education of children and youth is itself corrupted because education is construed primarily to achieve something grander, such as making the country more prosperous or better able to compete in world markets. John Dewey's dictum that «The educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end» (Dewey 1916, p. 117) is so thoroughly disregarded not as a matter of conscious rejection but because educational reform without a highly visible and often urgent external goal is simply incomprehensible to many educators and politicians alike.

What, then, is the point of engaging in educational reform at all? Perhaps one way of limning a way out of the dilemma of failed school reform would be to examine, however briefly, an actual example of a successful educational reform.

In my estimation, the most supremely successful school reform in the history of the United States is the *G.I. Bill of Rights*, but it is sometimes not considered a reform at all. In part, this is because it was not explicitly proposed as an educational reform or even widely considered so years after its inception.² In retrospect, however, the salutary and long-lived changes that the *G.I. Bill* wrought in higher education in particular, and, yes, in terms of the public good, are huge.

Although the legislation is commonly known simply as the *G.I. Bill* rather than by its official title, the *Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944*, the formal title provides an important indication of the immediate impetus behind it. The momentum for the legislation, it seems, was neither a grand vision of a new America nor a substantial overhaul of the American school system. If anything, the *G.I. Bill* seems to have been prompted primarily by an all too rare generosity of spirit, although somewhat influenced by a fear that returning servicemen and women would have a disruptive effect on American society as was the case after World War I. The potential inability of returning veterans to adjust to civilian life or, economically, the prospect of millions of ex-soldiers unable to find work created an abiding sense of unease among politicians of every stripe.

The bill simply offered generous aid to World War II veterans who sought to attend any educational institution and could meet the educational requirements of that institution. Those benefits came in the form of paying for tuition and books and even to providing subsistence allowances. There were virtually no restrictions on what the beneficiaries of the legislation could study. Anyone who had served in the armed forces could study practically anything – cosmetology, modern dance,

nuclear physics, farming, or even that most commonly cited of useless subjects, art history. Here and there, some social benefits were vaguely anticipated, but the main emphasis throughout was on the personal benefits accruing to the recipients. The bill served mainly to pay a debt beyond measure for services rendered.

Scattered opposition to the legislation came mostly from those who are habitually wary of federal support of education in any form but also, here and there, from college officials worried that such a mass influx of new students would lower the quality of higher education. Robert Maynard Hutchins, for example, chancellor of the University of Chicago, warned that one effect of the legislation would be to create «educational hobo jungles» (Hutchins 1944, pp. 20f.). Fearing that too many unqualified students were already being admitted to college, Harvard president James B. Conant, referred to the bill as «clearly a disaster» (Lemann 1999, p. 59). Indeed, at the time, many elite colleges and universities were functioning in part as gentlemen's clubs.

In the seven years after passage of the bill, some 8 million returning veterans took advantage of its provisions, 2,300,000 of them by attending colleges with others enrolling in various vocational programs and apprenticeships. Economists have since estimated that the return was roughly seven times the \$14.5 billion expended in the first seven years.

I understand the danger in drawing hasty conclusions from a single case of a successful educational reform, but there can be little harm in speculating about one or two of its notable features. It may even serve to elaborate on Labaree's arguments regarding the failure of educational reform as it has been usually defined. If, as Labaree says, «reform movements are deliberate efforts by groups of people to change schools in a direction they value and to resolve a social problem that concerns them,» then this reform, if the *G.I. Bill* can even be called a reform given Labaree's definition, is an exception.

To be sure, some social concerns were expressed here and there, but, in the end, the *G.I. Bill of Rights* simply provided an education in virtually any form to millions of returning veterans. This, not its relationship to any social problem, became its most enduring legacy. Probably the *G.I. Bill's* greatest impact, as historian Doris Kearns Goodwin concludes, was that «through this legislation, the educational horizons of an entire generation would be lifted» (Goodwin 1994, p. 513). No mean feat. In this case,

educational access was not the result of half-hidden social forces; it was deliberately created. It should be said, however, the kind of free-wheeling access that the *G.I. Bill* provided was for adults and would itself not have the same impact with children and youth.

I know this may come as a form of rank heresy, but what if educational reform had no explicit external goals and was directed mainly *to educate*? This means, of course, that serious inquiries would need to be undertaken into what the components of such an education should be and to how those reforms may best be incorporated into the way schools function. Intensive studies would need to be undertaken as to the how the great but ever-changing disciplines of knowledge – biology, literature, economics and the like – could be connected, not only to each other, but also to the way children and youth think and act, thus equipping them with a measure of power over their lives and destinies. It could also provide an initiation into (dare I say it?) the joys of intellectual play.

When Dewey says that «in our search for aims of education, we are not concerned ... with finding an end outside of the educational process to which education is subordinate» (Dewey 1916, p. 117), he does not mean that significant social benefits do not flow from bestowing a good education on future generations. How could he? Instead, he believed that desirable societal change can indeed emerge from a curriculum that realistically addresses the issue of what it means to be educated in the modern world along with a well-designed system of schools to implement it – but not by thinking of education as merely an instrument designed to achieve something really worthwhile beyond it.

Footnotes

- 1 I am assuming here that Labaree is not referring to small scale reforms, such as transforming a single failing school into at least a satisfactory one.
- 2 The bill was administered by the Veterans Administration, not the Office of Education.

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