

Introduction

Just see wherever we peer into the first tiny springs of the national life, how this true panacea for all of the ills of the body politic bubbles forth—education, education, education.

—ANDREW CARNEGIE, 1886¹

School houses do not teach themselves—piles of brick and mortar and machinery do not send out men. It is the trained, living human soul, cultivated and strengthened by long study and thought, that breathes the real breath of life into boys and girls and makes them human, whether they be black or white, Greek, Russian or American.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, 1903²

At the desk where I sit in Washington, I have learned one great truth: The answer for all our national problems comes down to one single word: education.

—PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1964³

[E]ducation is the silver bullet. Education is everything. We don't need little changes, we need gigantic, monumental changes. Schools should be palaces. The competition for the best teachers should be fierce. They should be making six-figure salaries. Schools should be incredibly expensive for government and absolutely free of charge to its citizens, just like national defense. That's my position. I just haven't figured out how to do it yet.

—SAM SEABORN, *THE WEST WING*, 2000, SEASON 1, EPISODE 18⁴

ACCORDING TO INDUSTRIALIST ANDREW CARNEGIE, scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, President Lyndon B. Johnson, and a character in the award-winning television drama *The West Wing*, education ends poverty, leads to wealth, makes a person a full human being, and should be cherished.

They were not the only ones to urge fellow citizens to grab the brass ring of education that circled on the American carousel. Mexican immigrant Celia, who lives in a central Texas city, tells an interviewer what she does for Daniel, her ten-year-old son:

Up to now, that Daniel is in fourth grade, I'll say all his teachers have been excellent teachers and I get along with them very well, I communicate. The first day of classes, and even before sometimes, I introduce myself, I ask them for their home phone number in case of an emergency, or in case the boy wants to lie and I have [to] doubt him, I ask them, I tell them, but it is not that I am bothering them. And teachers like to communicate, they ask for parents to go. For me, up to now, I don't know if I will have a problem later, but up to now not, they ask for parents to go. When I can I am there for an hour, and I am there to read in Spanish. Or if they have something to do I help them, but . . . I like to work with them, but if I see that they are not good I tell them.⁵

My mother, Fanny Janofsky, immigrated from Kiev, then part of Czarist Russia, to America in 1910. My father, Morris Cuban, also from Kiev, arrived in New York in 1912. They met through family connections and married in 1919. They had three sons, of whom I was the youngest.

Neither my father nor my mother completed school in Russia. My father worked in restaurants and delicatessens, and he and my mother had a small grocery store before he ended up as a jobber in Pittsburgh selling deli products from a paneled truck. He earned enough to house, feed, and clothe us for decades. Because my brothers were born in the 1920s, the Great Depression and World War II limited their schooling to getting high school diplomas. They eventually went into business after 1945.

I was born in 1934, and from the time I was a toddler, my mother drummed into me that since my brothers did not go beyond high school, I had to go to college to be a doctor or lawyer. I became neither. I did go to college, working at different part-time jobs to pay tuition and have

spending money while living at home. I graduated and became a teacher. My mother's message about getting an education was clear and constant.

As important as getting an education is to presidents, corporate leaders, scholars, Celia, and my mother, the screenwriter who put the words "I just haven't figured out how to do it yet" into Sam Seaborn's mouth captured the complexity of sussing out what direction schools should move and getting schools to go on that path. Generation after generation of American reformers over the past century believed in the power of tax-supported schools to enrich individuals and remedy national problems. Some writers have characterized this faith in education as a secular religion that Americans worship. Because of this devotion to schooling as an all-purpose solvent for parents, communities, and the nation, reformers again and again have tried to figure out, in Seaborn's words, "how to do it."⁶

It would be a grave mistake, however, to think that American reformers looked only at schools as targets for change.

Reforming individual Americans to be better persons has been in the American bloodstream since the *Mayflower* arrived. Ditto for reforming community institutions to be better places within which to live and work. Perfecting individuals and community institutions while solving problems of urban slums, corrupt city governments, poverty, racial segregation, corporate overreach, and anemic economic growth has been steady work for reformers. Time and again these reform movements reached far beyond schools.⁷

As predictable as climbing up a ladder to clean leaves from roof gutters every season, reforms have regularly swept across the nation. Since the early 1900s, three overlapping social, political, and economic movements have churned across the US and left marks on government, business, and community institutions, including public schools: the Progressive movement (1900s–1950s), the civil rights struggle (1950s–1970s), and binding schools to the economy (1980s–present).⁸

REFORM MOVEMENTS

Each of these political and social movements sought multiple goals, one of which included school reform. Early twentieth-century Progressives sought to remedy municipal corruption, corporate exploitation

of workers and consumers, and inefficient institutions including traditional, lockstep schooling.

Both Black and white civil rights advocates sought equal treatment for Blacks in every institution. They pressured federal and state governments to eliminate segregated hospitals, pools, motels, playing fields, and toilets. They demanded unencumbered voting rights. And they wanted urban and rural schooling equal to what white suburban parents received for their children.

And in the closing decades of the twentieth century, business leaders, alarmed by an economy falling behind Germany and Japan, restructured their industries, outsourced labor, and lobbied state and federal legislators to deregulate industries and lower taxes. Corporate leaders, seeking profits and returns to their investors, also pushed equal opportunity for minorities to achieve the American Dream. These business-minded reformers saw US public schools creating human capital necessary for the nation to compete economically in an increasingly interconnected global marketplace. Higher graduation requirements, common curriculum standards, and accountability for student test scores were reform-driven policies for producing that all-important human capital.

Binding together these seemingly different reform movements coursing through the American bloodstream over the past century were three common features:

- Reformers had a serene faith in better schools ridding society of individual and societal injustices, including crime, discrimination, and economic inequities. They believed schooling could create successful individuals and render American institutions havens of democracy, sources of economic growth and social justice.
- Reformers insisted that state and federal governments remedy political, social, and economic ills and be held accountable for the actions they take (or do not take).
- In pursuit of these multiple goals, reformer sought deep policy and practice changes in public schools, yet they left untouched the existing age-graded school structure and its “grammar of schooling.” Thus, each generation of school reformers unknowingly ended up preserving, not altering, the basic structures of primary and secondary schooling.

Without skipping a beat, each generation of policy elites and activist leaders sought major reforms in government through federal and state legislation, including reconfiguring schools. And they succeeded to a degree. The rhetoric of school reform in each generation included a to-do list of past failures that had to be corrected (e.g., hidebound traditional curriculum and practices; inefficient, unproductive schools churning out unskilled graduates). Each generation's talk and political action did alter some official policies and increased access to public schools, but inflated rhetoric followed by downsized policies left intact fundamental structures (e.g., the age-graded school and the grammar of schooling). And as each movement wound down, another cohort of school reformers shouted rhetoric, redefined problems, and pushed policies that the previous one had chased while leaving largely unaffected existing school structures.

And so, the last century of reform in America has been the story of these three political and social movements featuring feverish policy talk, limited policy actions, and erratic implementation spilling over public schools decade after decade. Beyond these reformers achieving a few of their intended goals in each era, what often go unnoticed are some of the unintended—even perverse—effects of reform talk, adopted policies, and their uneven execution.

PERVERSE OUTCOMES OF SCHOOL REFORMS

Consider the massive effort by civil rights reformers to desegregate schools between the 1960s and 1980s following the US Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954).

Where students went to school in the US depended on where their families lived. In most cities and suburbs, neighborhoods were segregated, producing schools that were nearly all-white, Black, or Latino. Activists used both direct action, such as boycotts and marches, and legal strategies to get urban and suburban districts to desegregate through busing, building schools that straddled city and county attendance boundaries, and taking school boards to federal court for maintaining segregated schools—strategies that civil rights reformers believed would bring minority and white children together to learn.⁹

Migration of white, Black, and Latino families moving into and out of urban residential areas where racial covenants and banking practices

kept neighborhoods segregated led to resegregated schools where mostly minority children enrolled—often coming from families in poverty. Suburban schools often became white enclaves. The unintended effect of direct actions and court-driven desegregation decisions, then, was to speed up resegregation of poor and minority students by the 1990s. Few policy makers after the *Brown* decision anticipated the return of racial and ethnic separation of whites from African American and Latino schoolchildren.¹⁰

Consider that in the 1980s and 1990s, policies aimed at tying schools closer to the nation's economy—raising state high school graduation requirements, strengthening curriculum standards, using tests to determine how well students achieved those standards, and holding students, teachers, schools, and districts responsible for student academic outcomes—would have dire effects upon US schools and students. Recall that state and local reform-minded policy makers and political leaders cheered the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001–2015), which contained many of these features, because reformers believed that such policies would help students and forge tighter links between schools and the economy.

The documented record, however, is mixed as to whether those reforms, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), aimed at producing skilled graduates who could enter an information-driven workplace, achieved the intended goals. Since the early 2000s, high school graduation rates have risen. And, yes, the percentage of high school graduates attending college has increased. But test score gains sufficient to close the achievement gap between minorities and whites have not improved. Nor is there much evidence that graduates are better prepared to enter the workplace than an earlier generation. Furthermore, the promise that higher standards and accountability would alter historic inequalities between minorities and whites remains unfulfilled. Unemployment and wages for African Americans have remained largely unequal and stagnant during economic growth and recessions.¹¹

Documenting the intended effects of school reforms is tough enough. But when researchers investigated the unintended or unexpected results of school reform, unusual outcomes became apparent.

Few reformers, for example, thought that NCLB, with its mandated state tests and its required reporting of Adequate Yearly Progress in test

scores, would push state and local policy makers to manipulate student results. State officials fiddled with numbers setting the threshold for a passing score on its tests to avoid many schools being tagged as “failing.” Additionally, many districts across the nation pressed teachers to taper their lessons to fit what was on these state tests. Schools set aside school time to prepare students for end-of-year exams. These unintended outcomes became obvious within a few years of NCLB’s passage.¹²

Even worse, in the wake of NCLB many urban and suburban districts found that their schools had failed to meet the law’s criteria for improvement. States published districts’ test scores, and districts announced school-by-school scores identifying those schools that were in danger of closing if results didn’t improve. Each year, shame and blame exponentially spread across the US as more schools flunked NCLB requirements. Local and state officials complained annually about the unfairness of such measures applied without acknowledging demographic differences in districts and schools. They lobbied their legislators to alter the federal law. The deluge of complaints and meager student outcomes led the US Congress to dump NCLB and pass the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) delegating the power to determine school success and failure to each state. President Barack Obama signed ESSA into law in 2015. In effect, the 2001 reform was re-formed in 2015.¹³

None of this, of course, is new. Policy researchers and historians are well aware of how hard it is to show unvarnished success of reform-driven policies over time in districts and schools. They are equally aware of how commonly unexpected outcomes accompany these very same policies. Nor is it new that these unanticipated outcomes seldom loosened decision makers’ embrace of reform-driven policies, simply because of the pervasive faith that Americans had in the power of schooling to uplift those who historically have done poorly in public schools—immigrants, rural migrants, and low-income children of color.

ROCK-HARD FAITH IN THE POWER OF SCHOOLING

Nonetheless, each generation of reformers believed in their hearts that they could solve thorny social, political, and economic problems. They knew what had to be done and had the answers. Public schools, they held, were the chief, if not the sole, determiner of individual and national

success. Schooling was the great equalizer shaping the life journey that individual children and youth traveled. Mirroring the deeply embedded and traditional belief that American institutions can indeed make people better, the school, like the church and family, was an instrument for not only reforming individuals and institutions but also curing societal ills such as illiteracy, poverty, and economic slowdowns.¹⁴

Recall that industrial magnate Andrew Carnegie endowed the Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1905 and funded the construction and maintenance of nearly 1,700 free libraries across the country between 1883 and 1929.¹⁵ Recall also that President Lyndon B. Johnson had as the centerpiece of his War on Poverty the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), which provided billions of dollars to poor and minority children then called “disadvantaged.” And it is precisely on this point of faith about the curative powers of schooling that one pillar of that belief has wobbled and remains contested in 2021, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For many decades, there has been an enduring struggle among educators, parents, policy makers, and public officials over how much students’ backgrounds shape school effects.

For true believers, schooling improves everyone regardless of family circumstances. Yet (and this is a very big “yet”) much evidence has piled up over the past century that social class matters when it comes to who sails through age-graded schools and who stumbles along the way. Consider, for example, that the majority of urban districts in the US now house mostly minority and poor children. More than half of African American children and six out of ten Hispanic children and youth attended schools in 2017 that were at least 75 percent minority students. Most of these schools are located in urban districts and historically segregated southern rural districts. Note further than in 2013 researchers found that over half of US students are poor.¹⁶

Moreover, the research literature on children’s academic performance has shown time and again that anywhere from over half to two-thirds of minority and white students’ test scores—lower, middle, and upper class—can be attributed to their family’s socioeconomic background.¹⁷

Yet many educators in public traditional and charter schools in poor neighborhoods either ignore or dispute those research findings. They continue to operate on the principle that engaged and committed staff unaccepting of “excuses” (e.g., low-income family, all-minority

enrollment, neighborhood crime) could lift students out of poverty through helping them become academic achievers, enter college, and secure well-paid jobs. Both evidence of the crippling effects of poverty on academic achievement and findings that singular urban schools can produce high-achieving students are available and rich.¹⁸

The issue, then, of how much family background and ethnic and racial school demography affect student achievement has to consider a large body of evidence of schools graduating low-income minority students who enter higher education. Hovering over all of this point-counterpoint argument is another uncomfortable and inescapable fact: formal schooling occupies only a small portion of a child's day. Consider that children and youth attend public schools about 1,100 hours a year for thirteen years (or just under 15,000 hours). That time represents less than 20 percent of a child's and teenager's waking time for all of those years in school. Hence, most of a student's time is spent outside of school in the family, the neighborhood, religious settings, and the workplace.¹⁹

Important as time spent in school is, economically and socially, in accumulating content and skills and diplomas for jobs and careers, it is often given far more weight—recall the basic faith that Americans have in the power of schooling—than life lived outside of school in assessing not only how a child becomes an adult but also what kind of adult.

So two fundamental questions past generations of reformers in these three movements neglected, sometimes considered, but seldom wrestled with publicly are about the connection between individuals, schools, and society, questions that remain unanswered to contemporary crusaders:

- How much of a child's academic success or failure in school is due to family background?
- Can schools, reflecting the larger society's faith in perfecting individuals and institutions, not only alter the effects of family background but also reform society?

There are many ways to answer these questions in trying to determine the degrees of impact that these reform movements have had on children and youth, including poor and minority students. Individual memoirs (e.g., Roger Wilkins' *A Man's Life: An Autobiography*), case studies (e.g., Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here*), surveys (e.g.,

Coleman Study, 1966), longitudinal research on groups of children (e.g., Perry Preschool Project), and many other designs have established general statements, more often than not challenged by other researchers and, especially, policy makers. No design is invulnerable, including what I offer in this book, a mix of research, analysis, and experiential data.²⁰

Confessions of a School Reformer is one person's direct experiences in the three reform movements that have swept over the nation's public schools over the past century. Other accounts may arrive at different answers than what I present here. So be it. Using direct experiences informed by a broad and deep knowledge of the history of schooling, I delve into each of these reform movements to make sense of a complex community institution and its effects on my life.

The book is ambitious. I connect larger, swirling reform movements with my experiences as a student, teacher, superintendent, and researcher. I confess errors in beliefs and stumbles in practices. And I draw conclusions that often challenge mainstream wisdom about school reforms over the past century. The book, then, is both a policy history of school reforms over the past century and a memoir. It is a tricky combination, and readers will determine to what degree I succeed.

I have organized the book in alternating chapters of historical analysis and memoir to answer four sets of questions:

- How did the Progressive movement (1890s–1940s) shape public schooling in governance, organization, curriculum, and instruction, both nationally and in the Pittsburgh schools that I attended as a student (ch. 1)? As a student between 1939 and 1951, what do I recall and make of my experiences in three Pittsburgh schools in the fading years of Progressive school reform (ch. 2)?
- How did the civil rights movement (1950s–1970s) shape public schooling in governance, organization, curriculum, and instruction, both nationally and locally in the Cleveland and Washington, DC, school systems (ch. 3)? As a teacher in Cleveland and Washington, DC (1956–1972), what classroom and school reforms did I design and implement during the civil rights movement (ch. 4)?
- How did the standards, testing, and accountability movement (1970s–present) shape public schooling in governance, organization,

curriculum, and instruction nationally and in Arlington, Virginia (ch. 5)? As the Arlington County superintendent between 1974 and 1981, what district reforms did the Arlington School Board and I design, adopt, and implement during the standards, testing, and accountability movement (ch. 6)?

- As a former practitioner and historian of education, which reforms did I research and study and what were my conclusions? (ch. 7)

The four memoir chapters will contain one additional feature that calls to mind the title of this book. When I describe my direct experiences as a teacher, administrator, and researcher during surges of reform, I will elaborate my primary beliefs at the time and detail any mistaken ideas and slipups in practice that I pursued and committed. Thus, *Confessions of a School Reformer*.

For example, following the chapter analyzing the standards, testing, and accountability movement, I render a personal account of being Arlington's school chief during the early years of this national reform movement. I believed that the district, not the school or classroom, was the primary unit of school reform to improve schooling, especially for children of color. While that belief has substantial merit—and I specify those merits in the chapter—I have also learned that a district strategy of reform is too narrow. Surely, the district as a key piece to any strategy for improving governance, curriculum, and instruction is worthy, but such school reform fails to account for the larger social and political contexts (e.g., the impacts of poverty, racism, and the political vulnerability of tax-supported public schools in the community, state, and nation). That omission was an error in my thinking.

The following chapters document how perfecting imperfect individuals and a flawed society drove American reformers over the past century to mount three movements targeting public schools for improvement. Historically, faith in formal schooling as paving the road to personal success and national prominence has been an enduring motif. From Andrew Carnegie to Lyndon B. Johnson to a character in the popular drama *The West Wing*, education has been touted as essential not only to becoming a successful individual who is noticed, recognized, and approved but also to strengthening communities and, finally, maintaining a democratic

nation committed to equal opportunity. American faith in schooling, while occasionally tarnished, remains steadfast even during and after the 2020–2021 pandemic.

Schooling was surely important to me as I traversed eight decades as a student, teacher, administrator, and researcher immersed in these larger reform movements. Just how important it has been in my life and the events that shaped who I am is a question I explore in the ensuing chapters.