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Education, Markets, and the Public Good

The selected works of David F. Labaree

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CHAPTER 6

PUBLIC GOODS, PRIVATE GOODS

The American struggle over educational goals

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Americans love to beat up on their schools. Particularly in the last couple of decades, we have taken schools to task for a multitude of sins. Among other things, we have complained that schools have abandoned academic standards, schools have undermined American economic competitiveness, schools are disorderly places that breed social disorder, schools waste massive sums of money, schools no longer provide a reliable way for people to get ahead, and schools reinforce social inequality in American society.

Many of these charges are unfair or even demonstrably false,¹ but the result of these complaints has been a lot of hand-wringing and an endless series of calls for fundamental reform. Big problems call for big changes, and a wide range of such changes have been suggested: Restructure the organization of schools; permit parents to choose which school their children attend; promote specialized magnet schools; establish autonomous charter schools; create Black academies; professionalize teaching; require competency testing for teachers; open up alternative routes to teaching; upgrade the professional education of teachers; establish national achievement tests for students; require performance testing as a prerequisite for endorsed diplomas; equalize school funding; make funding dependent on school performance; extend the school year; reinforce basic skills; increase vocational education; beef up the academic curriculum; develop national curriculum standards; increase multiculturalism within the curriculum; end bilingual education; stabilize the American family; provide economic opportunities for the poor; institute prayer in schools; attack the roots of racism; promote traditional values; and so on.

This widely varied array of proposed reforms, in turn, is grounded in an equally varied array of analyses defining the root causes of problems with schools. Some argue that the root problem is *pedagogical*, arising from poor quality and preparation of teachers and from inadequate curriculum. Others argue that the central problem is *organizational*, arising either from too much bureaucracy (the absence of market incentives) or from too much loose coupling (the absence of effective administrative control). Still others charge that the primary cause of educational deficiencies is *social*, arising from chronic poverty, race discrimination, and the preservation of privilege. Yet another view is that the key problem is *cultural*, the result of a culture of poverty, disintegrating family values, and a growing gap between school culture and popular culture.

In contrast with these perspectives, I argue that the central problems with American education are not pedagogical or organizational or social or cultural in

nature but are fundamentally *political*. That is, the problem is not that we do not know how to make schools better but that we are fighting among ourselves about what goals schools should pursue. Goal setting is a political, and not a technical, problem. It is resolved through a process of making choices and not through a process of scientific investigation. The answer lies in values (what kind of schools we want) and interests (who supports which educational values) rather than apolitical logic. Before we launch yet another research center (to determine "what works" in the classroom) or propose another organizational change (such as school choice or a national curriculum), we need to engage in a public debate about the desirability of alternative social outcomes of schooling.

Schools, it seems, occupy an awkward position at the intersection between what we hope society will become and what we think it really is, between political ideals and economic realities. This in turn leads to some crucial questions: Should schools present themselves as a model of our best hopes for our society and a mechanism for remaking that society in the image of those hopes? Should schools focus on adapting students to the needs of society as currently constructed? Or should they focus primarily on serving the individual hopes and ambitions of their students? The way you choose to answer this question determines the kind of goals you seek to impose on schools.

The terms of this choice arise from a fundamental source of strain at the core of any liberal democratic society, the tension between democratic politics (public rights) and capitalist markets (private rights), between majority control and individual liberty, between political equality and social inequality. In the American setting, the poles of this debate were defined during the country's formative years by the political idealism of Thomas Jefferson and the economic realism of Alexander Hamilton (Curti, 1935/1959). The essential problem posed by that tension is this: Unfettered economic freedom leads to a highly unequal distribution of wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic control; but at the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the name of equality infringes on individual liberty, without which democracy can turn into the dictatorship of the majority. Each generation of American reformers has tried to figure out a way to preserve the Jeffersonian ideal of political equality in the face of the Hamiltonian reality of economic inequality—and to do so without stifling the productivity of the market economy. Yet in spite of a wide variety of plausible and innovative attempts to find a remedy, this dilemma has outlasted all efforts at reform. Political equality and social inequality simply do not mix easily, and institutions that arise from efforts to pursue both of these goals reflect this continuing tension.³

Grounded in this contradictory social context, the history of American education has been a tale of ambivalent goals and muddled outcomes. Like other major institutions in American society, education has come to be defined as an arena that simultaneously promotes equality and adapts to inequality. Within schools, these contradictory purposes have translated into three distinguishable educational goals, each of which has exerted considerable impact without succeeding in eliminating the others, and each of which has at times served to undermine the others. I call these goals *democratic equality*, *social efficiency*, and *social mobility*.⁴ These goals differ across several dimensions: the extent to which they portray education as a public or private good, the extent to which they understand education as preparation for political or market roles, and the differing perspectives on education that arise depending on one's particular location in the social structure.⁵

From the *democratic equality* approach to schooling, one argues that a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner. We all depend on this

political competence of our fellow citizens, since we put ourselves at the mercy of their collective judgment about the running of our society. A corollary is that, in the democratic political arena, we are all considered equal (according to the rule of one person, one vote), but this political equality can be undermined if the social inequality of citizens grows too great. Therefore schools must promote both effective citizenship and relative equality. Both of these outcomes are collective benefits of schooling without which we cannot function as a polity. Democratic equality, then, is the perspective of the citizen, from which education is seen as a public good, designed to prepare people for political roles.

The *social efficiency* approach to schooling argues that our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence. The idea is that we all benefit from a healthy economy and from the contribution to such an economy made by the productivity of our fellow worker. As a consequence, we cannot allow this function to be supported only by voluntary means, since self-interest would encourage individuals to take a free ride on the human capital investment of their fellow citizens while investing personally in a form of education that would provide the highest individual return. Instead, society as a whole must see to it that we invest educationally in the productivity of the entire workforce. Social efficiency, then, is the perspective of the taxpayer and the employer, from which education is seen as a public good designed to prepare workers to fill structurally necessary market roles.

The *social mobility* approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions. The aim is get more of this valuable commodity than one's competitors, which puts a premium on a form of education that is highly stratified and unequally distributed. This, then, is the perspective of the individual educational consumer, from which education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles.

In an important way, all three of these goals are political in that all are efforts to establish the purposes and functions of an essential social institution. But one major political difference among them is positional, with people in different positions adopting different perspectives on the purposes of education. The democratic equality goal arises from the citizen, social efficiency from the taxpayer and employer, and social mobility from the educational consumer. The first goal expresses the politics of citizenship, the second expresses the politics of human capital, and the third expresses the politics of individual opportunity. Of the three approaches to schooling, the first is the most thoroughly political in that it sets as its goal the preparation of students as actors in the political arena. The other two goals, in contrast, portray education as a mechanism for adapting students to the market. And this suggests another major differentiating factor, the way in which each goal locates education in the public-private dimension. For the democratic equality goal, education is a purely public good; for social efficiency, it is a public good in service to the private sector; and for social mobility, it is a private good for personal consumption.⁶

Three defining goals for American education

This article takes the form of an essay about the historical roots of these three educational goals, the impact they have had individually and jointly on the structure and process of schooling in the US, and the implications of this analysis for contemporary efforts at educational reform. In this section, I examine the

nature of each of the three purposes of American education and the impact that each has had on schools. In the sections that follow, I explore the interaction of these three goals, showing how they have in some ways reinforced each other and in other ways undermined each other. This situation raises important questions. How can schools realistically be expected to promote all of these goals at the same time and remain coherent and effective? Yet, at the same time, how can they promote one at the expense of the others without eliminating important outcomes and abandoning important constituencies? I argue that incoherence and ineffectiveness are important consequences of this standoff among conflicting goals, which in part help explain many of the problems afflicting American schools. But I argue that the most significant problems with education today arise from the growing dominance of one goal over the others. The social mobility goal has emerged as the most influential factor in American education. Increasingly, it provides us with the language we use to talk about schools, the ideas we use to justify their existence, and the practices we mandate in promoting their reform. As a result, public education has increasingly come to be perceived as a private good that is harnessed to the pursuit of personal advantage; and, on the whole, the consequences of this for both school and society have been profoundly negative.

Democratic equality

There is a strong ideological tradition in American history that sees schools as an expression of democratic political ideals and as a mechanism for preparing children to play constructive roles in a democratic society.⁷ For the Whig leaders who founded the common schools in the mid-nineteenth century, this political goal provided the most compelling justification for schooling (Cremin, 1980; Kaestle, 1983). Although its relative weight among the trio of American educational goals has gradually declined over the years, it has continued to play a prominent role in shaping educational rhetoric, school practice, and the structure of the credentials market. And at times, such as the 1960s and 70s, it has reasserted itself with considerable vigor and effect. This, the most political of the major purposes of American education, has taken three related but distinct operational forms within schools: the pursuit of *citizenship training*, *equal treatment*, and *equal access*. Let us consider each of these in turn.

The best single explanation for the founding and early diffusion of common schools in this country is that they were seen as an essential to the process of nation building and the related process of *training for citizenship* (Meyer *et al.*, 1979). "It may be an easy thing to make a Republic," wrote Horace Mann in 1848 (1957: p. 92); "but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion." From the perspective of the common school founders, the new American republic in the mid-nineteenth century was still on shaky ground, and its survival depended on a citizenry with a fully developed sense of civic virtue. They felt schools could help counteract the growth of selfishness (arising from a burgeoning capitalist economy) by instilling in their charges a personal dedication to the public good. They could make republicans who would be able to function in a market economy without losing their sense of citizenship in the commonwealth (Cremin, 1980; Kaestle, 1983; Labaree, 1988).

Citizenship training has continued to play a significant role in the ideology and practice of American education in both rhetoric and practice. No pronouncement

about education or call for educational reform has been complete without a prominent reference to the critical consequences of schooling for the preservation of democracy. Even the authors of the influential national report *A Nation at Risk*, who focused primarily on economic consequences, felt compelled to stress that "A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983: p. 7). Curriculum in American schools expresses this concern, both through specific courses (such as social studies, civics, government, and American history) that are designed to instill in students a commitment to the American political system, and more broadly through a continuing strong emphasis on liberal arts over narrowly specialized education. The rationale for liberal arts is that all members of a free society need familiarity with the full range of that society's culture in order "to participate intelligently as adults in the political process that shapes their society" (Gutmann, 1987: p. xi; Hirsch, 1987), and as a result of this emphasis the US promotes general education at even the highest levels of the system, in comparison with other countries, where specialized instruction begins much earlier (Turner, 1960). The recent movement to raise educational standards has made it clear that the call for increased "competency over challenging subject matter" is intended in part to "ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship" (National Education Goals Panel, 1995: p. 11).

A second political goal for schools has been the pursuit of *equal treatment*, which originated in the same concern for preserving the republic that motivated the push for citizenship training. Fearful of the social differences and class conflict that arose from the growth of capitalism and immigration, the founders of the common school argued that this institution could help provide citizens of the republic with a common culture and a sense of shared membership in the community. Horace Mann stated the case for education's equalizing role with characteristic eloquence. Noting "that vast and overshadowing private fortunes are among the greatest dangers to which the happiness of the people in a republic can be subjected," he argued that "surely, nothing but Universal Education can counterwork this tendency to the domination of capital and the servility of labor," acting as "the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (1957: pp. 85-7). The common school movement promoted these ends by establishing universal enrollment, uniform curriculum, and a shared educational experience for their students (Katz, 1978, 1987; Katznelson and Weir, 1985; Labaree, 1988). Over the years, this commonality has given way to an educational process that is increasingly stratified according to characteristics such as age, academic achievement, educational level, curriculum level, institutional prestige, and social class—largely in response to pressure to promote the social efficiency and social mobility goals (Katznelson and Weir, 1985). But in the early twentieth century, reformers sought to mitigate this process of stratification and restore equal treatment through a variety of leveling mechanisms, including pressure for social promotion of students from grade to grade, the easing of academic standards, the sharp increase in nonacademic curriculum options, grade inflation, and the institutionalization of the comprehensive high school (Labaree, 1984, 1988, 1996).

More recently, schools have sought to apply this egalitarian goal to groups whose ascribed status denied them equal educational standing in the nineteenth century. The recurring demand for equal treatment has removed the Protestant bible, public prayer, and other divisive religious practices from the public schools. It has motivated a powerful movement to provide equal educational experiences

for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, and sex—resulting in the formal desegregation of schools and in attempts to remove race and gender stereotypes from textbooks, incorporate the experiences of non-Whites and females in the curriculum (through the movement for multiculturalism), and reduce discriminatory practices in the classroom. It has led to attacks on tracking and ability grouping because of the potentially discriminatory effects of these practices, fostering in their place such alternatives as heterogeneous grouping and cooperative learning. It has brought about “the nationwide effort to reintegrate special education students in the regular classroom, so that handicapping conditions will not consign students to an inferior education. It has spurred the movement by states to equalize financial support for school districts despite unequal tax bases. It has promoted programs of compensatory education and affirmative action in order to make certain that educational equality is not just a formal possibility but a realizable outcome. And it has helped support the recent demand by reformers that all students be held to the same high level of educational performance standards.

In addition to citizenship training and equal treatment, the goal of democratic equality has taken a third form, and that is the pursuit of *equal access*. It is in this form that the goal has perhaps exerted its most powerful impact on the development of American schools (Cohen and Neufeld, 1981). Equal access has come to mean that every American should have an equal opportunity to acquire an education at any educational level. Initially, this led to the effort that occupied school reformers for most of the nineteenth century, trying to provide enough schools so that every child could have a seat in an elementary classroom at public expense. After this end was largely accomplished late in the century, the focus of educational opportunity efforts expanded to include the high school, with dramatic effects. What had been a tiny sector of public education, enjoyed primarily by the elite, grew rapidly into a mass system of secondary schooling, with secondary enrollments doubling every decade between 1890 and 1940. Then after the Second World War, higher education became the object of the demand for equal access, leading to an extraordinary expansion of enrollments—to the point where attendance at a postsecondary institution became the norm rather than the exception (Labaree, 1990).

This pressure to provide access to American schools on a continually widening scale has necessitated an enormous and ever-increasing outpouring of public funds. In addition, the requirement that education at all levels should be open to all segments of the population—and not just the most privileged or even the most able—has exerted a profound effect on all aspects of the institutional structure. It has led to the mass production of teachers, the proliferation of programs and courses, the search for ways to improve pedagogical efficiency, the concern about enhancing administrative control, and the stress on fiscal parsimony—all in order to meet the educational problems raised by the sheer quantity and diversity of the pool of students (Cohen and Neufeld, 1981).

Social efficiency

On the one hand, Americans have sought to make schools an institutional expression of their democratic and egalitarian political ideals and a social mechanism for realizing these ideals. Yet, on the other hand, they have also sought to make schools a mechanism for adapting students to the requirements of a hierarchical social structure and the demands of the occupational marketplace. This second educational goal, which I refer to as *social efficiency*, has exerted its influence on American schools through structural pragmatism—operationalized within schools in the form of *vocationalism* and *educational stratification*. Let us consider each of these in turn.

The social efficiency goal has shaped American schools by bending them to the practical constraints that are embedded in the market-based structuration (Giddens, 1984) of economic and social life. One clear sign of this influence is the historical trend toward *vocationalism*. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a heterogeneous alliance of leaders from business, labor, and education launched an effort to make the school curriculum more responsive to the needs of the occupational structure. While these groups disagreed about the desired effect of this effort on social mobility, they united in the conviction that schools were in danger of becoming socially irrelevant and economically counterproductive unless they succeeded in better articulating educational content with future job requirements (Lazerson and Grubb, 1974). Then as now, the simple reality was that students eventually leave school and enter the workforce, whether or not their schooling prepared them to carry out this work effectively.

In its narrow form, the movement for vocationalism sought to shift the curriculum away from courses that trained students in traditional academic subjects and broadly defined liberal learning and toward programs that provided training in the skills and knowledge required to carry out particular job roles. The result was the creation of a series of strictly vocational programs—which quickly became an enduring part of the American curriculum, particularly at the secondary and (later) community-college levels—preparing students for such future jobs as auto mechanic, lathe operator, beautician, secretary, and draftsman. The value of these programs, from the perspective of social efficiency, is that they offer a thoroughly practical education, which provides a steady supply of employees who are adequately trained to fill particular jobs. Nothing could be more impractical, from this perspective, than the kind of general education promoted by democratic equality, in which graduates would emerge as an undifferentiated group with a common set of broad competencies that are not easily adapted to the sharply differentiated skill-demands of a complex job structure. For example, following this logic, Michigan's governor in 1996 moved to shift funds from adult education into job training, since, as the head of the state Jobs Commission put it, “It's more important to align adult education programs with the needs of employers rather than to educate people for education's sake” (Cole, 1996).

Yet the impact of vocationalism on schooling has been much broader than what is reflected in this explicitly vocational curriculum, which has never accounted for more than a small minority of the courses taken by high school students. For example, only 16 percent of the Carnegie units accumulated by 1992 high school graduates were in vocational courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, table 132). The true significance of vocationalism is visible in the philosophical shift that took place in the general aims of American schooling in the period following 1890. The essence of this shift was captured by the president of the Muncie, Indiana, school board who, in the 1920s, told Robert and Helen Lynd (1929: p. 194), “For a long time all boys were trained to be President.... Now we are training them to get jobs.” More important than the inclusion of typing classes alongside those in history was this fundamental change in the purposes of schooling—from a lofty political goal (training students to be citizens in a democratic society, perhaps to be president) to a practical economic goal (getting students ready to enter the workforce, preparing them to adapt to the social structure). This change affected students who were going to college as much as those in the auto shop.

The social efficiency argument for education is found at the heart of nearly every educational address delivered by a governor or president, every school board's campaign for a millage increase or bond issue, every educational reform document. Consider the florid but not atypical language found in the opening

words of *A Nation at Risk*, the report that kicked off the movement in the 1980s and 1990s to raise educational standards:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... We report to the American people 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: p. 5)

Other documents in the standards movement have also prominently touted the economic benefits of raising academic requirements. The National Education Goals Panel (1995: p. 11), for example, asserts in Goal 3 that "By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter... so they may be prepared" not only for "responsible citizenship" and "further learning" but also for "productive employment in our Nation's modern economy."

What makes this kind of appeal such an irresistible part of educational rhetoric is its immense practicality. The logic is compelling: Schooling supplies future workers with skills that will enhance their productivity and therefore promote economic growth. This logic allows an educational leader to argue that support for education is not just a matter of moral or political correctness but a matter of good economic sense. Schooling from this perspective can be portrayed as a sensible mechanism for promoting our economic future, an investment in human capital that will pay bountiful dividends for the community as a whole and ultimately for each individual taxpayer. After all, the majority of taxpayers at any one point in time do not have children attending the public schools. These citizens are not deriving direct benefit from the education provided by these schools, and they may well feel that the indirect political benefits promised by the democratic-equality rationale are rather remote and ephemeral compared with the immediate loss of income occasioned by an increase in school taxes. For this group, the social efficiency argument may well strike a chord with them by pointedly asserting that their jobs, their pensions, and their family's economic well-being depends on the ability of schools to turn out productive workers. At the same time, public officials who have to approve the annual budget for education—which swallows up fully one third of all state and local revenues (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995: table 33)—also find the social efficiency rationale helpful because of the way it reassures them that this expenditure is not a waste of public money but, instead, a sound investment.

Over the years, the idea that schools should be making workers more than making republicans has undermined the ability of schools to act as a mechanism for promoting equality of access and equality of treatment. The notion of educational equality is at best irrelevant to the expansion of GNP, and it is counterproductive in a capitalist economy, where the pursuit of competitive advantage is the driving force behind economic behavior. Thus, under the pressure to be economically productive, schools have adopted a structure that is highly stratified. One form this has taken is in the emerging hierarchy of educational levels, leading from elementary school to high school to college and then graduate school. The upward expansion of enrollment in this hierarchy over time, while increasing the average years of schooling for the population as a whole, has also provided access to higher levels of education at which individuals can be

distinguished from the herd, with the key division being between those who persist in education and those who drop out at an earlier level. From the perspective of democratic equality, this educational division represents a serious political and social problem. But from the perspective of social efficiency, the vertical distribution of educational attainment is quite desirable, since it reflects the vertical structure of the job market and therefore helps efficiently allocate individuals to particular locations in the workforce, as students move horizontally from a given level in the educational hierarchy to a corresponding level in the occupational hierarchy. And in the view of social efficiency, this allocation is seen to be both logical and fair, because those who have advanced farther up the educational ladder are seen as having learned more and therefore having acquired greater human capital—which promises to make them more skillful and productive employees.

These quantitative distinctions are further enhanced by the qualitative differences that have emerged between schools within each level of the educational system. For example, employers and students alike know that all colleges are not created equal. A degree from an Ivy League college is worth considerably more in the job market than one from a regional state university, since employers assume that a graduate from the former is smarter and better educated, which then makes that graduate a potentially more productive employee. As a consequence, college graduates are stratified in a way that reflects the stratification within the white-collar sector of the occupational structure. A similar logic is at work in stratifying high schools, with a diploma from a wealthy suburban high school granting the bearer greater access to advanced education and good jobs than a diploma from a high school in a poor inner-city neighborhood. Again, democracy and efficiency are exerting conflicting pressures on American education to move toward greater equality on the one hand and greater inequality on the other.

Even within individual schools, the academic experience of students (beginning in the 1990s) has become increasingly stratified (Oakes, 1985). Ability grouping and curriculum tracking guarantee that even those who have completed the same number of years in school will frequently have had educational experiences that are quite different in both academic content and economic value. The result is the same as with stratification between levels of schooling and between schools at the same level. With students sorted according to both putative ability and the requirements of different job roles (high reading group vs. low reading group, academic track vs. vocational track), schools create educational channels that efficiently carry groups of students toward different locations in the occupational structure. Thus while the goal of democratic equality promotes schools that prepare students for the full range of political and social roles in the community, the social efficiency goal promotes a structure of schooling that limits these possibilities in the name of economic necessity.

One thing to keep in mind, however, is that, although social efficiency promotes the sorting of students and although this sorting often leads to the limitation of opportunities for these students, at the same time this goal provides strong support for the social value of student learning at all levels of the system. From the social efficiency perspective, society counts on schools to provide the human capital it needs to enhance productivity in all phases of economic life, which means that schools must assure that everyone engages in serious learning—whether they are in college or kindergarten, suburb or inner city, top track or bottom track. In this sense then, social efficiency treats education as a public good, whose collective benefits can only be realized if instruction is effective and learning is universal. As we will see next, none of this is true in the case of the third goal.

Social mobility

Whereas social efficiency argues that schools should adapt students to the existing socioeconomic structure, the social mobility goal asserts that schools should provide students with the educational credentials they need in order to get ahead in this structure (or to maintain their current position). Both of these goals accept the inequality at the heart of a market society as given, and both are eager for schools to adapt themselves to the demands of such a society. Where they differ is in the vantage point they assume in looking at the role of schooling in a market society. The efficiency goal focuses on the needs of the social system as a whole (adopting the perspective of the provider of educational services—the state, the policymakers who lead it, and the taxpayers who support it—and of the employer who will put the graduates to work), but the mobility goal focuses on the needs of individual educational consumers. One sees the system from the top down, the other from the bottom up. One sees it as meeting a collective need, and the other as meeting an individual need. As a result, from the perspective of the efficiency goal, it does not matter who ends up filling which job. As long as all jobs are filled with competent people, the individual outcomes of the allocation process are seen as irrelevant to the efficient operation of the system. But from the perspective of the mobility goal, the outcome for the individual is precisely what matters most. The result is an emphasis on *individual status attainment* rather than the production of human capital.

One useful way of capturing these differences is to note that the social efficiency goal (like the democratic equality goal) conceives of education as a *public good*, whereas the social mobility goal conceives of it as a distinctly *private good*. A public good is one where benefits are enjoyed by all the members of the community, whether or not they actually contributed to the production of this good. Police protection, street maintenance, public parks, open-air sculpture, and air pollution control are all examples of public goods that potentially benefit all members of a community, whether or not they paid the taxes that were necessary to provide these services. In the language of public goods theory, public goods offer people a free ride (Olson, 1971). Schools that focus on giving everyone the skills required for effective citizenship (as proposed by the democratic equality goal) are public goods, for they offer a free ride to all children regardless of ability to pay and at the same time provide a benefit to all members of society (a sustainable political system, competent and informed fellow citizens) regardless of whether they or their children ever attended these schools. Schools are also public goods if they provide the human capital required by the economy and effectively fit students into slots in the occupational structure (as proposed by the social efficiency goal), since the community as a whole is seen as reaping the benefit from this institution in the form of a growing economy and a stable economic future. Once again, the benefits are collective in that they accrue to everyone⁸ whether or not he or she contributed to the support of these schools or even attended them. Childless adults and families with children in private schools all enjoy the political and economic benefits of public schools when viewed from the perspective of democratic equality and social efficiency. However, one reaches a very different conclusion when looking at schools as a private good (Hirschman, 1970).

The consumer perspective on schools asks the question, "What can school do for me, regardless of what it does for others?" The benefits of education are understood to be *selective* and *differential* rather than collective and equal. The aim of pursuing education is for the individual student to accumulate forms of educational property that will allow that student to gain an advantage in the

competition for social position. This means that what I gain from my educational experience is my own private property, and the more of this property that I can acquire, the better chance I have to distinguish myself from the rest of the pack and win the social competition.⁹

The impact of this perspective on schools is profound. One such impact is to promote the *stratification* of education—which, as I noted earlier, is also promoted by the social efficiency goal. The last thing that a socially mobile educational consumer wants out of education is the kind of equal educational outcome produced in the name of democratic equality. Thomas Green, D. P. Ericson, and R. H. Seidman (1980: p. 25), in their book, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System*, put it this way: "What parents want is not that their children have equal opportunity, but that they get the best that is possible, and that will always mean opportunities 'better than some others get.'" This can only take place if education is structured in such a manner that the social benefits of education are allocated differentially, with some students receiving more than others (Boudon, 1974; Collins, 1979). In their role as self-interested educational consumers, therefore, parents want an educational system that is stratified, and this stratification takes the same three forms identified previously in the discussion of social efficiency (Hogan, 1987).

First, they demand that schooling take the form of a *graded hierarchy*, which requires students to climb upward through a sequence of grade levels and graded institutions and to face an increasing risk of elimination as they approach the higher levels of the system. The result is a system shaped much like a pyramid. As students ascend through high school, college, and graduate or professional school, they move into an atmosphere that is increasingly rarefied, as the numbers of fellow students begin to fall away and the chance for gaining competitive advantage grows correspondingly stronger. And from the social mobility perspective, the chance to gain advantage is the system's most salient feature. There is convincing evidence that consumer demand for this kind of educational distinction (rather than a societal demand for human capital) has been largely responsible for driving the extraordinary upward expansion of education in the US during the last 150 years (Brown, 1995; Collins, 1979; Hogan, 1987; Labaree, 1988). For, as enrollments have moved toward universality at one level (first the grammar school, then the high school, and most recently the college), the demand for social distinction necessarily has shifted to the next higher level. Randall Collins describes the social consequences of this ongoing effort to establish and maintain relative educational advantage:

As education has become more available, the children of the higher social classes have increased their schooling in the same proportions as children of the lower social classes have increased theirs; hence the ratios of relative educational attainment by social classes [have] remained constant throughout the last 50 years and probably before.

(Collins, 1979: p. 183)

Second, since each level of the system constitutes a rather large category offering at best rather crude distinctions, consumer-minded parents or students also demand a structure of education that offers *qualitative differences between institutions at each level*. As a result, they want to attend the high school or college that has the best reputation and therefore can offer its graduates the greatest distinction in competition with graduates from the lesser institutions (Cookson and Persell, 1985; Kingston and Lewis, 1990; Levine, 1986). This kind of reputational

difference can lead to preferential access to jobs and further education. This is why the value of a house in any community depends in part on the marketability of the local school system and why wealthy suburban communities aggressively defend the high status of their school systems by resisting any efforts to reduce the striking differences between systems—such as efforts to redistribute tax revenues in order to equalize per-capita school spending or to bus students across district boundaries in order to reduce class and race discrepancies between schools (Kozol, 1991; Rubin, 1972). At the college and graduate level, the same kind of concern leads to an intense effort by consumers to gain admission to the most highly regarded institutions (Klitgaard, 1985). Parents are willing to spend as much as \$30,000 a year to send their children to an Ivy League school, where the reputational rewards are potentially the greatest (Fox, 1993; Griffin and Alexander, 1978). As a result, universities are well aware of how important their reputational rank is in helping them maintain market position. "In the competition for resources," says the spokesperson at Pennsylvania State University, "reputation becomes the great variable on which everything else depends. The quality of students, the faculty and staff an institution attracts; the volume of research grants and contracts, as well as private gifts; the degree of political support—all these and more hinge on reputation" (Eng and Heller, 1996). Within this status-conscious world of higher education, high tuition may not be a deterrent but an attraction, since it advertises the exclusivity and high standing of the institution (which then offers discounts under the counter in the form of scholarships).¹⁰

Third, consumers demand a *stratified structure of opportunities within each institution*, which offers each child the chance to become clearly distinguished from his or her fellow students. This means they want the school to have reading groups (high, medium, and low), pull-out programs for both high achievers (gifted and talented programs) and low achievers (special education), high school tracks offering parallel courses in individual subjects at a variety of levels (advanced placement, college, general, vocational, remedial), letter grades (rather than vague verbal descriptions of progress), comprehensive standardized testing (to establish differences in achievement), and differentiated diplomas (endorsed or not endorsed, Regents or regular). Parents are well aware that the placement of their children in the right ability group or program or track can give them an advantage in the competition for admission to the right school and the right job and as insurance against early elimination in education's process of "tournament mobility" (Griffin and Alexander, 1978; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1976). As a result, they actively lobby to gain the right placement for their children, and they vigorously resist when educators (pursuing a more egalitarian vision) propose elimination of some form of within-school distinction or another, such as by promoting multi-ability reading groups, ending curriculum tracking, or dropping the gifted and talented program (Cusick, 1992; Wells and Serna, 1996).

However, since the consumer approach to education is so highly individualized, the kind of pressure that it exerts on schools in any given case depends on the particular *social position* of the individual consumer. For those at the middle and lower ends of the social structure, the aim is social mobility, a chance to move up, but, for those toward the upper end, the aim is to hold onto an already attractive position and try to transfer this advantage to their children through the medium of education. Bourdieu (1986) defines the latter strategy succinctly as the effort to transform economic capital and social capital into cultural capital. In order to pull off this transformation, the advantaged call for an educational system that offers a variety of vertical options, which allow them to get their own children into the

upper levels of whatever options are available—the most advanced degrees (MD, JD, PhD, etc.), the most exclusive institution at a given educational level (an Ivy League college), and the top curricular stratum within a given institution (the gifted program). But for the more disadvantaged families, these upper level options are a longshot at best, and as a result they may well see such options as a refuge for the privileged that undermines the chances for their own children to gain access to more basic forms of educational property: a decent elementary school, a high school diploma, a vocational program at the community college.

The social mobility goal, therefore, by portraying education as a consumer commodity, produces different kinds of effects on education depending on the social class of the consumers in a given educational setting, since the social position of these consumers affects their perception of their own educational needs. One result is that pressures for intensive competition and radical stratification of education are likely to come more strongly from those at the top of the social scale than from those at the bottom. It is elite parents that see the most to gain from the special distinctions offered by a stratified educational system, and therefore they are the ones who play the game of academic one-upmanship most aggressively. It is they who can afford to bid up the price of a house in the right school district and of a diploma from the right college. In fact, the social mobility perspective often puts groups in conflict with each other, such as when working class parents press to get their children greater access to educational benefits (by being bused to a better school or being provided with stronger preparation in basic skills) and upper middle class parents press to hold onto the educational advantages they already have (by preserving their monocultural neighborhood school or establishing a gifted program) (Oakes, 1985; Rubin, 1972, 1976; Wells and Serna, 1996). This fractured and contradictory impact of the social mobility goal on schools, arising from its view of education as a private good, distinguishes it from both of the other goals, which view education as a public good that leads to a more coherent and generalized form of pressure on education grounded in the perceived needs of the community as a whole.

Another major impact of the social mobility goal on education derives from the way it treats education as a form of *exchange value*, in contrast with the other two goals, for which education is a form of *use value*. In the latter cases, the citizen and the taxpayer (or employer) place value on education because they consider the content of what is learned there to be intrinsically useful. Both look on education as providing students with a useful array of competencies that are required either for constructive citizenship in a democratic society (democratic equality) or for productive work in a market society (social efficiency). However, things look different from the perspective of social mobility. The value of education from this point of view is not intrinsic but extrinsic, because the primary aim is to exchange one's education for something more substantial—namely, a job, which will provide the holder with a comfortable standard of living, financial security, social power, and cultural prestige.

Jobs tend to be allocated to a significant extent based on the quantity and quality of education that the applicants have, characteristics that determine a person's location in what Thurrow (1977) calls the *labor queue*. And the easiest and most common way for employers to measure these educational differences is by examining the level and institutional prestige of a candidate's educational credentials (Spence, 1974). They assume that by selecting candidates with the best credentials (those at the head of the queue) they are obtaining employees who have acquired the highest level of productive skills; however, they rarely look beyond the credentials to test this assumption (Berg, 1971). As a result, educational

credentials come to take on a life of their own. Their value derives not from the useful knowledge they symbolize but from the kind of job for which they can be exchanged. And the latter exchange value is determined by the same forces as that of any other commodity, through the fluctuation of supply and demand in the marketplace—the scarcity of a particular credential relative to the demand for that credential among employers (Collins, 1979).¹¹

From the perspective of social efficiency, the use value and exchange value of education are inextricably linked, and therefore this distinction does not pose any educational or social problems. Drawing on neoclassical economics, the proponents of this goal argue that the exchange value of a diploma is simply a reflection of the human capital that it embodies. Accordingly, a higher degree is seen as worth more on the market than a lower degree because it represents a greater amount of usable knowledge, of knowledge that is economically productive (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). However, there is a wealth of evidence to the contrary, suggesting that, from the moment educational credentials came to be a primary mechanism for allocating people to jobs, the exchange value of these credentials began to separate from the learning that went into acquiring them. This emerging independence of educational exchange value from its connection to usable knowledge is the most persuasive explanation for many of the most highly visible characteristics of contemporary educational life—such as, overcredentialing (the chronic overproduction of advanced degrees relative to the occupational need for advanced skills) and credential inflation (the rising level of educational attainment required for jobs where skill requirements are largely unchanged) (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976; Freeman, 1976; Rumberger, 1981; Shelley, 1992).

Consider the effects of all this on education. When they see education through the lens of social mobility, students at all levels quickly come to the conclusion that what matters most is not the knowledge they learn in school but the credentials they acquire there. Grades, credits, and degrees—these become the objects to be pursued. The end result is to reify the formal markers of education and displace the substantive content. Students learn to do what it takes to acquire the necessary credentials, a process that may involve learning some of the subject matter (at least whatever is likely to be on the next test) but also may not. After all, if exchange value is key, then it makes sense to work at acquiring the maximum number of markers for the minimum investment of time, money, and intellectual energy. The payoff for a particular credential is the same no matter how it was acquired, so it is rational behavior to try to strike a good bargain, to work at gaining a diploma, like a car, at a substantial discount. The effect on education is to emphasize form over content—to promote an educational system that is willing to reward students for formal compliance with modest performance requirements rather than for demonstrating operational mastery of skills deemed politically and socially useful (Cusick, 1983; Powell *et al.*, 1985; Sedlak *et al.*, 1986; Steinberg, 1996).

One final consequence of the social mobility goal is to pressure education to take on a *meritocratic* form. From the perspective of the consumer, education is an arena for zero-sum competition filled with self-interested actors seeking opportunities for gaining educational distinctions at the expense of each other. This is especially true for families from the upper middle class, whose experience demonstrates the enormity of the potential benefit that can accrue from education and whose privileged starting position means that they also have a long distance to fall if the educational outcomes do not turn out in their favor. In this Hobbesian setting, the competitors are equally worried about winning and losing, about taking advantage of others and having others take advantage of them. The resulting atmosphere of

mutual wariness leads to a collective call for the educational system to organize the competition in a relatively fair and open manner, so that the competitors with the greatest individual merit will be most likely to emerge at the top.

[...]

Historical patterns of goal ascendancy

Now that I have reviewed the basic characteristics of the three major goals embedded in American education, I would like to consider briefly the relative prominence of individual goals at different points in recent history.¹² At one level, the history of educational goals in the US is a story of shifting priorities, as particular goals come into favor, then slide into the background, only to reemerge later with renewed vigor. These kinds of pendulum swings are what gives the history of educational policy and reform its episodic quality, with old issues resurfacing regularly in policy talk and with old reforms continually recycling through the educational system (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). In the common school era (the mid-19th century), democratic equality was the dominant goal of American education; the primary outcomes education was asked to produce were political and moral, the preservation of the commonwealth in the face of the rise of capitalist social and economic relations. Issues of social efficiency and social mobility were visible but muted.

But late in the century, both of the latter rose into prominence. The potential for getting ahead via education grew increasingly into a potent reality, and the growing enrollments in the upper elementary grades began to precipitate a consumer demand for distinctive credentials at the high school and college level. At the same time, educational leaders were growing concerned about how to deal with an increasingly large and heterogeneous group of students at the high school level and how to prepare these students for entry into an increasingly differentiated work force. As a result, the progressive era (at the start of the twentieth century) was dominated by social mobility and social efficiency concerns, and school curriculum and educational opportunity became markedly more stratified—with the invention of tracking, vocationalism, ability testing, and the comprehensive high school. The democratic equality strain of progressivism largely lost out to the kind of administrative progressivism that pushed these changes (Tyack, 1974).

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, the tide turned toward democratic equality (in conjunction with social mobility) as the national movement for racial equality infused schooling and spilled over into efforts to provide an education that was socially inclusive and offered equal opportunity across lines of class, gender, and handicapping condition as well as race. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, the momentum shifted toward the movement for educational standards, which emphasized social efficiency (again in conjunction with social mobility). The standards effort reflected a growing concern about economic competitiveness and the need for education to supply the human capital required for increased economic productivity; it also reflected a growing worry about the exchange value of high school and college credentials in the face of their wide availability.

At another level, however, the history of American educational change is less a story of pendulum swings than of steady evolutionary growth¹³ in the influence of one goal—social mobility—both in conjunction with and at the expense of the others. From this perspective, the most striking thing about that history is the way the consumer conception of education has gradually come to dominate the structure

of American schooling as well as the policy talk about schools. It seems increasingly that no reform is possible, and neither of the other two goals can be advanced effectively, without tapping into the concerns raised by social mobility: the need for education to maintain its value as a consumer good that can provide individuals with social advantage.

The prominent role played by consumer-generated market pressures is one of the key things that makes American education so distinctive in comparison with educational systems elsewhere in the world. As Ralph Turner (1960) has argued, American education is uniquely influenced by a concern for promoting what he calls *contest mobility*, with the result that the system emphasizes winning over learning and opportunity over efficiency. A number of scholars have pointed out the ways that American educational institutions act in a peculiarly entrepreneurial manner in an effort to cater to the demands of their consumers. This market sensitivity is the result of a number of factors, including: weak state and even weaker federal influence; radically decentralized control; vulnerability to local political and parental influence; a dependency on per-capita funding (via state appropriations or tuition); the need to attract local support for millage and bond elections; the absence of general standards for curriculum and academic performance; the tradition of relatively free student choice in selecting classes, programs, and institutions; open access to higher education without effective standardized screening mechanisms; and a highly competitive buyers' market at the postsecondary level (Brown, 1995; Collins, 1979; Labaree, 1990; Trow, 1988). And as we have seen, the result is that American education at all levels is infused with market structures and processes that emphasize consumer choice, competition, stratified curriculum, the preservation of local autonomy (for schools districts and individual institutions), and a rapid response to consumer demand (Cohen and Neufeld, 1981; Hogan, 1989, 1990, 1992; Labaree, 1995).

[...]

Notes

This chapter frames the argument for my forthcoming book—with the working title, *Degrees of Advantage: How Getting Ahead Interferes with Getting an Education*—which will be published by Yale University Press in the fall of 1997. An earlier version of the article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New York (1996); I am grateful to John Rury for his thoughtful and detailed comments as a critic at that meeting and to Kathleen Murphy for her helpful comments as chair of the session. I am also grateful to three anonymous reviewers who provided me with extraordinarily constructive and empathetic guidance in making revisions. In addition, I want to thank David Cohen and Cleo Cherryholmes for their comments on a very early version of this article. Finally, I am indebted to my students, in the College of Education at Michigan State University, with whom I have talked about these issues for years.

- 1 Berliner and Biddle (1995) have written a cogent defense of public schools against a number of such accusations, drawing on a wide array of evidence to support this defense. In a similar vein, Gerald Bracey (1995) publishes annual reports in which he exposes the misinformation that underlies much of public education's bad press.
- 2 A classic effort to summarize what research says about American education is the booklet *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, published by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986.
- 3 A large number of scholars have seen this tension as central in understanding the history of American education. For example, see Hogan (1985), Katznelson and Weir (1985), Curti (1935/1959), Cohen and Neufeld (1981), Cohen (1984), Reese (1986), Labaree (1990), and Carnoy and Levin (1985).

- 4 In my earlier thinking on this issue (Labaree, 1988), I defined these educational goals simply as *democratic politics* and *capitalist markets*. I am grateful to David Hogan (personal communication, October 15, 1988) for originally pointing out to me that the latter goal consists of two distinct and frequently contradictory market purposes, which I have chosen to identify as *social mobility* and *social efficiency*.
- 5 Many scholars have written about the conflicting purposes embedded within American education, although they have defined and categorized these purposes in a variety of ways that differ from my own approach. In addition to the sources cited in Note 2, examples include: Tyack and Cuban (1995), Goodlad (1979, 1984), Boyer (1983, 1987), Fullan (1991, 1993), Paris (1995), Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), Apple (1982), Kozol (1991), Gurtmann (1987), de Lone (1979), Cusick (1992), and Connell *et al.* (1982).
- 6 The three goals that serve as the focus for this article do not encompass all of the goals that Americans have for their schools. There are a number of such additional purposes. Among other things, we ask schools to deliver medical and psychological services, to act as baby-sitters for children and warehouses for surplus adolescent workers, to promote esthetic awareness and physical conditioning, to serve as a community center and a municipal symbol, to foster personal empowerment and healthy social development, and to pursue many other goals as well. I choose to focus on the three goals spelled out here because these goals are particularly important in defining the way in which we talk about and act toward our schools. That is, they are more socially salient and more politically resonant than other educational goals. The reason for this, as I have suggested, is that these goals arise from the basic contradiction between political equality and social inequality that lies at the heart of the American experience.
- 7 For strong statements of this vision of education, see Gutmann (1987), Barber (1992), Hirsch (1987), Welter (1962), and Meier (1995).
- 8 This is not to say that everyone receives the *same* benefit. The social efficiency benefit of education is collective, in that everyone receives some payoff from increased productivity and economic growth, but those whom the educational system sorts out early and assigns to the lower social positions benefit markedly less than those who emerge later and end up in higher level positions. In short, social efficiency offers a trickle-down version of education as a public good.
- 9 Neoclassical economics argues that the pursuit of individual ambition produces collective benefits to society through the guiding hand of the market. From this perspective, there is nothing socially dysfunctional about treating education as a private good for personal gain. My argument in this article, however, is that the educational and social consequences of this self-interested approach to education are in fact often (but not always) quite negative.
- 10 A classic example is the University of Chicago, which decided in the 1980s that it might lose its appeal to consumers if it failed to charge as much as its competitors in the Ivy League. As a result, it nearly quadrupled annual tuition between 1980 and 1995, pushing charges to \$27,000 (Eng and Heller, 1996).
- 11 I am racing quickly through complex territory here, in the process brushing past a number of significant distinctions. Credentialing theory (Berg, 1971; Collins, 1979), signaling theory (Spence, 1974), and labor queue theory (Thurow, 1977) all take somewhat different positions on the question of how employers use credentials in the hiring process. (See Grubb, 1993, for a review of this literature.) For my purposes, however, the key point is that for all these scholars the exchange value of educational credentials is not a simple reflection of their human capital content.
- 12 This brief historical sketch draws on work that is elaborated elsewhere: Labaree (1988, 1996) and Hogan (1987, 1990, 1992).
- 13 Tyack and Cuban (1995) make a strong case for thinking about education change as occurring at these two levels—regular swings of policy talk and reform initiatives combined with underlying trends that are more evolutionary than cyclical in nature.

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THE CHRONIC FAILURE OF CURRICULUM REFORM

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One thing we have learned from examining the history of curriculum in the twentieth century is that curriculum reform has had remarkably little effect on the character of teaching and learning in American classrooms. As the century draws to a close, it seems like a good time to think about why this has been the case.

The failure of curriculum reform was certainly not the result of a lack of effort. At various times during the last 100 years, reformers have issued high-visibility reports proposing dramatic changes in the curriculum (Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education in 1918, A Nation at Risk in 1983); created whole new subject areas (social studies, vocational education, special education); sought to reorganize the curriculum around a variety of new principles (ability grouping, the project method, life adjustment, back to basics, inclusion, critical thinking); and launched movements to reinvent particular subjects ("New Math," National Council of Teachers of Mathematics math, phonics, whole language).

In spite of all these reform efforts, the basic character of the curriculum that is practiced in American classrooms is strikingly similar to the form that predominated in the early part of the century. As before, the curriculum continues to revolve around traditional academic subjects—which we cut off from practical everyday knowledge, teach in relative isolation from one another, differentiate by ability, sequence by age, ground in textbooks, and deliver in a teacher-centered classroom. So much effort and so little result.

How can we understand this problem? For starters, we can recognize that curriculum means different things at different levels in the educational system, and that curriculum reform has had the greatest impact at the level most remote from teaching and learning in the classroom. Starting at the top of the system and moving toward the bottom, there is the rhetorical curriculum (ideas put forward by educational leaders, policymakers, and professors about what curriculum should be, as embodied in reports, speeches, and college texts), the formal curriculum (written curriculum policies put in place by school districts and embodied in curriculum guides and textbooks), the curriculum-in-use (the content that teachers actually teach in individual classrooms), and the received curriculum (the content that students actually learn in these classrooms).

Each wave of reform dramatically transforms the rhetorical curriculum, by changing the way educational leaders talk about the subject. This gives the feeling that something is really happening, but most often it's not. Sometimes the reform moves beyond this stage and begins to shape the formal curriculum, getting translated into district-level curriculum frameworks and the textbooks approved for

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