

THE
EDUCATION
GOSPEL

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The Economic Power of Schooling



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~ Transforming the High School

THE PROMISE of the American high school once seemed unbounded. From a small and unimportant institution—in 1900, less than 10 percent of the fourteen- to seventeen-year-old cohort was enrolled—high school became nearly universal during the twentieth century. Yet despite its great hopes, the high school is now a blighted institution, its academic purposes reduced to preparing some students for vocational study in college and its direct vocational role eliminated by the collapse of the youth labor market. The irony is that both the high school's promise and its tragedy are rooted in the same phenomenon: the vocationalizing of American education.

A century ago the high school was primarily an academic institution—in the sense that its curriculum was dominated by academic subjects, and in the more disparaging sense that formal schooling was distant from the political, community, and economic life outside its doors. Academic dominance gave way under the pressure to vocationalize the curriculum, to prepare students directly for entry-level jobs that traditionally did not require secondary schooling. The vocational education movement changed the high school, as trade and industrial training, secretarial and clerical preparation, home economics, and agricultural education became staples of the curriculum. But the broader significance of vocational education lay in its role in transforming the conception of schooling to one of getting *all* students better jobs, not

just those in voc ed. Since that change, even the efforts to make high school more academic, like the recent accountability mechanisms focused on basic English and math and the pressure of College for All, have also had to show that they would improve students' future opportunities, either directly or through their access to college. The transformation of the high school has been crucial to revising our basic concept of its purpose.

Schools had always prepared youth for work, but they typically did so by embedding basic competencies—reading, writing, and arithmetic—in shared moral values like hard work, individual responsibility, and commitment to family, church, and community. In the last half of the nineteenth century, however, changes in the American economy increased the pressure on the schools to modify their approach to job preparation. The long decline in apprenticeships became apparent. The growth of large-scale industrial corporations, the complexities of technology, and the increasing need for office workers led employers to shift away from hiring adolescents and toward hiring less transient adults, often immigrants and rural migrants newly arrived in America's booming cities. As the youth labor market deteriorated, concerns for social stability mounted because of the large numbers of young people now unemployed or drifting from one dead-end job to another.

These shifts encouraged the vocational education movement. Initially, the goal was to integrate traditional learning—with its emphasis on moral and mental discipline—with occupational instruction. But the bridge between older purposes of schooling and job preparation was unstable, and an Education Coalition composed of the business community, unions, social reformers, philanthropists, educators, and federal and state policy makers formed to establish vocational education in America's high schools.

The success of this Education Coalition changed the structure of secondary schooling. During the twentieth century, high school for all became a reasonable goal, as secondary education expanded to include most fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds. Vocational tracking, followed by other forms of stratification like IQ testing and the "general" curriculum track, differentiated the comprehensive high school internally, so that while all students went to a common school, they were treated in different ways. Vocational education opened the way for a curricular explosion and widespread student choice. It also created a new conception of equity rooted in equality of educational opportunity.

In the early twenty-first century, with high school now seemingly the most intractable problem in American education, the consequences of vocationalism are less attractive than they were a century ago. Out of concerns ranging from "a rising tide of mediocrity" to violence in the schools, secondary schools have become the center of reform efforts. Policy makers focus on imposing higher academic standards, while large numbers of students regard high school as a necessary evil—necessary for individual advancement but intrinsically dreary. In the absence of a serious job market for their graduates, high schools primarily function as a transmission belt to college or simply as a warehouse for keeping young people off the streets until they leave school. Many flaws in the high school can be traced to its ambiguous occupational roles, to its provision of academic learning in the service of long-run vocational purposes, and to the explosion of curricular choices that both divide the student body and minimize the expectations of learning—all part of the process that transformed secondary education in the century of vocationalism.

There are many ways out of the high school's current dilemmas. As we argue in the last section of this chapter, these alternatives require confronting the dualisms that the movement for vocational education created—between the academic and the vocational, between school and work as locations for learning, between the serious business of growing up and the trivial demands on high school students. Only by overcoming these dualisms will it be possible to construct an institution worthy of high school for all.

The Decline of Work-Based Education

Learning at work—either informally or in formal apprenticeships—was traditionally the way youths made the transition to adulthood. For young men, apprenticeships moved them from family to work and independence; for young women, learning adult roles usually occurred within their own household rather than in the household of a relative or trusted friend. In its idealized form, apprenticeship seems a marvelous way to learn. A skilled and respected adult models the desired competencies, and then supervises practice by the apprentice. A broad range of knowledge may be gained in this way: manual abilities; literacy, numeracy, visual and oral skills; knowledge of the informal culture of a workplace and the ethics of a craft or profession; how to balance

individual responsibility and cooperation; trade secrets that give experts their special reputations. When the process works well, the apprentice sees the final product—crops grown, books printed, food preserved, a patient cured, a computer program online—and understands the relationship of all subtasks to the outcome. This is a model that many Americans hold dear, “the way we learn most naturally.” Various individuals have tried to resurrect it both as a model for academic learning—sometimes called “cognitive apprenticeship” (Collins, Brown, and Newman, 1989)—and as an ideal of work-based learning, attempted most recently in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (Berryman, 1995).

As attractive as work-based learning seems, in practice it has never achieved substantial importance in America, and the reasons for this help us understand the growing emphasis on formal schooling for vocational preparation.¹ Colonial Americans tried to import European apprenticeship models, but without a system of highly regulated craft guilds or a legal system to enforce apprenticeship contracts, both masters and apprentices routinely violated their agreements. Apprentices often walked away from their contracts when masters did not live up to the terms of agreement. Ben Franklin, abused by his master and unpaid, was the most famous of these runaways; he sailed from Boston to Philadelphia, where he set up his own printing shop. Masters often kept their apprentices at repetitive and menial tasks, emphasizing production and neglecting the educational side of apprenticeship. Employers often “poached” those already trained from competitors, or hired partly trained apprentices as they needed them, so that they did not have to pay for training. The fledgling unions of the early nineteenth century tried various strategies to overcome the flaws of apprenticeships—preventing the overemployment of apprentices to control periodic glut, regulating the duration of apprenticeship to forestall inadequate training, and increasing the wages of apprentices and journeymen—but they did not have much influence.²

The economic fluctuations of a market economy played further havoc with apprenticeships. In recessions, apprentices were simply let go; in robust economic times, young men easily found jobs on their own. Technological changes undermined traditional skills, and craftwork declined as it was replaced by labor-saving machinery tended by semiskilled workers. And without the stability of long-term relation-

ships, the role of the master standing in loco parentis, overseeing the moral development of the young apprentice, essentially collapsed in the decades after 1800. Under these conditions it made more economic sense to hire workers who concentrated exclusively on production, train them in narrow ways to do specific jobs, pay them what the labor market required, and leave the noneconomic aspects of apprenticeship—education in a broad sense and moral supervision—to someone else. By the early twentieth century, it became an article of faith that apprenticeships no longer functioned well. The authors of *Learning to Earn* summed up the prevailing wisdom (Lapp and Mote, 1915, 67): “Apprenticeship had its origins and served its purpose in an industrial era altogether different from that prevailing. Apprenticeship does not meet the present needs of industry. As a scheme of education it is altogether inadequate.”

In its place, other modes of work-based education developed. These included private trade schools sponsored by employers and philanthropists; schools run by corporations to train their own workers; public continuation schools, inspired by those in Germany, where adolescents could attend school part-time while they worked; and cooperative education combining school-based and work-based learning. But none of these efforts served large numbers, and many of them did not endure. They foundered on the problems apprenticeships had suffered—particularly on the costs to employers and the inability to prevent poaching, as well as on the unwillingness of students to enter a training system in the absence of enforceable standards and widely recognized credentials.

The weakness of work-based learning, both in apprenticeships and in other experiments around 1900, illustrates why it has been so difficult to resurrect this apparently “natural” form of learning. To succeed, apprenticeship requires regulation to enforce the terms of contract, a balance of education and production, some mechanism to prevent employers from avoiding training by poaching, stable employment and economic conditions, and a personal and paternal relationship between master and apprentice that is quite at odds with the impersonal authority structure of the modern workplace. And without strict regulation, apprenticeship has no way of enhancing equity, of moderating the inevitable variation among families in their ability to find apprenticeships for their sons or to promote nontraditional oppor-

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tunities for their daughters. So Americans have periodically embraced work-based learning as both “natural” and ideal, but in the main they have placed their faith in formal schooling as the vehicle for occupational preparation.

From Moral and Civic Purposes to Vocational Goals

From the start, American schools embodied both religious and moral purposes.³ Colonial and nineteenth-century Americans did not separate moral behavior from religion. This unity was first articulated in the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s school law of 1647: “It being one chief project of that old Deluder Satan, to keep men from knowledge of the Scriptures . . . It is therefore ordered that every township [shall] appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to read and write.” The nineteenth-century expectation that the Scriptures and the Golden Rule would be taught also reflected the belief that schooling was a moral enterprise based in religion, specifically Protestantism. In the most popular textbooks of the nineteenth century, the McGuffey Readers, children learned to read through stories about the rewards of virtuous behavior, the risks of vice, the family as the center of moral life, the necessity of schooling, the virtue of work, and the centrality of community and citizenship. Literacy, the most fundamental task of formal schooling, was not just a skill to be applied in multiple contexts but was a way to learn the precepts necessary for life in a moral community (Gorn, 1998).

The moral purposes of schooling were critical to the expansion of public education. Calling for public support of education early in the nineteenth century, the New York Free School Society found the city’s poor children “reared up by parents who . . . are either indifferent to the best interests of their offspring, or, through intemperate lives, are rendered unable to defray the expense of their education,” a situation that led to “ignorance and vice, and all those manifold evils resulting from every species of immorality” (Kaestle, 1973, ch. 4). Public schools could compensate by instructing such children in the moral values and behavior they could not learn from their parents—a theme that would resonate into the twenty-first century.

The moral purposes of education flowed naturally into civic purposes. The American Revolution and the establishment of the new na-

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tion gave education a broad political goal: citizens of the democratic republic needed to be literate as well as moral. Unless individuals were educated to be democrats, steeped in a morality tied to the common good, the nation would be torn apart by individualism and selfish “interests.” The common schools thus had to be institutions where *all* children might learn the common core of knowledge, abilities, and values necessary for the nation. In practice, of course, there were all sorts of restrictions on who attended common schools. “Republican motherhood” meant teaching women to be sufficiently literate only to educate their children in appropriate values. Slavery meant that African Americans were formally denied citizenship, thus limiting their schooling; Native Americans and Mexicans suffered the same exclusion. But the consensus that schooling had civic and moral purposes was rarely contested. The earliest version of the Education Gospel that propelled the expansion of public education was dedicated to public goals, the strengthening of the nation through the moral, civic, and social responsibilities of individuals.

Economic development was also part of the early Education Gospel. Advocates argued that education increased the nation’s material riches as well as individuals’ chances of economic success. Horace Mann, the champion of public education, proclaimed in the 1830s that the common school would be “the most prolific parent of material riches” whereby “even the poorest may pass on to the realization of cherished hopes.” The increase in material riches was contingent on moral and civic education, not primarily on “skills”; literacy and numeracy furthered individual economic success but only when married to such character traits as working hard, restraining one’s self, supporting republican government, and respecting private property. (The phrase that George W. Bush invoked during the Enron scandal—“No capitalism without conscience, no wealth without character”—could have come from the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on moral character as a precondition for wealth.) Similarly, the introduction of such “relevant” subjects as mathematics and the sciences in high schools was simultaneously a way of deepening one’s intellectual and moral powers and a source of knowledge that would be useful in a surging commercial and industrial economy. The influence of schooling on economic success was thus indirect; learning the technical skills of a particular occupation still occurred on the job, not in the classroom.

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The public purposes of schooling continued as ideals through the twentieth century. But the balance that made economic goals an outgrowth of moral and civic learning changed to an emphasis on direct vocational preparation. The fate of the manual training movement in the late nineteenth century illustrates the process. Advocates of wood-working and other handwork assumed that students learned more effectively through direct (or hands-on) experiences, not through “the sameness and monotony” of traditional recitation and book learning. While the skills learned in industrial drawing or woodworking would be useful when students became employed, manual training’s primary purpose was moral: to teach the value of hard work through the discipline of manual exercises—“training the head through training the hand.” Manual learning promoted an integration of “head” and “hand” that had not been part of the common schools; as the cover of Calvin Woodward’s 1887 manifesto proclaimed:

Hail to the skillful, cunning hand!
 Hail to the cultured mind!
 Contending for the World’s command,
 Here let them be combined.

The manual training movement served as an important bridge between the past and the future by encompassing multiple messages. It simultaneously looked to the past to recreate a preindustrial world of autonomous artisans and to the future dominated by industrial work. It reinforced the values of the common school by insisting that all students—girls as well as boys, and students of all classes and races—could benefit from direct experience, while also suggesting that manual training was especially appropriate for poor and minority students needing special forms of education.

These multiple purposes were contradictory and deeply unstable, and the combination of moral goals, hands-on learning, and occupational training quickly came apart. By the first decades of the twentieth century, manual training was replaced by efforts to teach explicitly vocational skills directly applicable to jobs. The Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education in 1906 criticized manual training as “a cultural subject mainly useful as a stimulus to other forms of intellectual effort—a sort of mustard relish, an appetizer . . . severed

from real life as completely as have [been] other school activities.” Charles Prosser, prominent in the movement for vocational education, argued in 1912 that “manual training is not the sort of education which [students] need to fit them for their life-work”—and by life work Prosser meant vocations (Kliebard, 1999, 26).

The movement for an explicitly vocational education attracted a broad group of supporters, including manufacturers, unions, social reformers, philanthropists, public officials, and educators. Between 1880 and 1917, when the Smith-Hughes Act began providing federal funds for vocational education, this version of the Education Coalition included the most prominent believers in vocational training.⁴ But they were believers with quite different perspectives on why school-based vocational preparation was necessary.

Manufacturing associations, worried about the growing labor movement and competition with Germany, hoped to use vocational education to overcome a perceived shortage of skilled labor—carpenters, plumbers, metal pattern and tool makers, machinists and mechanics, and electricians—and to limit union influence over access to those jobs.⁵ They saw school-based vocational preparation as a way to avoid the expense of elaborate skill training on the job.

Organized labor, primarily represented by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was more ambivalent about school-based vocational training. To the AFL, vocational education had the potential to keep working-class students in school longer, preventing them from flooding the labor market as cheap workers, and it promised greater skills and higher earnings for working-class children. But the labor movement and other reformers feared the erosion of broad preparation and “industrial intelligence”—the “mental power to see beyond the task which occupies the hands for the moment.” They worried, too, that vocational education was a second-class education leading to second-class jobs, a way of diverting working-class students away from academic education. Ultimately labor joined the Education Coalition, partly to prevent it from being dominated by business and to avoid the worst forms of narrow vocational education. As one unionist admitted, “We cannot stop the trend in the direction of this kind of education in the school; but we can, if we cooperate with the educators, have it come our way” (Lazerson and Grubb, 1974, doc. 8). Organized labor and organized capital therefore compromised; neither wanted the other to

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control access to occupational preparation, and moving it into the public schools was one way to retain a modicum of control and avoid domination by the enemy.

A third group to join the Education Coalition included settlement-house workers, urban reformers, philanthropists, and public officials concerned with the well-being of poor and immigrant children. Their arguments tended to be both economic and moral: vocational education would prepare children of the poor for better jobs than the unskilled work currently available to them, and the combination of work skills and work values would help eliminate the social problems of poverty—overcrowding, disease, crime, vagrancy, abandonment of families.

The coalition was rounded out by educators who wanted to make schooling more important. Most early twentieth-century educators were committed to the traditional purposes of preparing moral and literate citizens based on a traditional curriculum. But they were also coping with a flood of new responsibilities—immigrant children, labor market changes, the health and social development of students, concern about the Sturm und Drang of adolescence, special classes for students with special needs, and an emerging extracurriculum of clubs and athletics. In this maelstrom, multiple arguments on behalf of vocational education proved persuasive. One was especially attractive: that vocational programs would keep students in school longer, since educators had come to believe that young people left school as much because of the irrelevant curriculum as for economic reasons. Vocational education would introduce a curriculum and pedagogy that were more relevant and more conducive to “active learning” than the traditional memorization and recitation. The primary dropout problem involved boys, and advocates especially hoped that vocational training would provide young males with a relevant and active curriculum, keeping them out of unskilled labor markets and avoiding the “the wasted years” syndrome, the period of time after leaving high school that many spent moving from one unskilled job to another (Kantor, 1988; Kliebard, 1999).

For girls, the growth and feminization of office work created a quiet revolution in their occupational preparation. To be sure, the notion of preparing women for jobs outside the home was still troubling; the vocational program of choice was home economics, designed to prepare

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young women to be mothers and homemakers. But the numbers of women engaged in manufacturing, mechanical, and clerical jobs increased threefold from 1890 to 1920. Fueled by the need for office workers, the clerical labor market for women helped make commercial education the success story of vocational education. The percentage of high school students enrolled in commercial courses rose from 21.7 percent in 1900 to 57.7 percent in 1934 (Powers, 1992). In fact, surveys in the first three decades of the twentieth century often found office work as the top occupational choice of young girls, even ahead of teaching—especially for working-class girls.⁶

The growing emphasis on a vocationally oriented curriculum was strengthened by an emerging belief in educational opportunity based on differentiated learning. The nineteenth-century common school had stressed the same education for all students. Even if children possessed different capacities to learn, the school's goal was to teach common values through a shared curriculum. The early high schools also emphasized a homogeneous curriculum; as the Committee of Ten, a group of educators convened to bring coherence to the curriculum, declared in 1894, “Every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease.” At the end of the nineteenth century, however, such views were declining in favor of a revised vision emphasizing different learning for different students. This was especially true for those “children of the plain people,” as the president of the National Education Association referred to the children of immigrant, working-class, and minority parents, who by the seventh grade had “demonstrated their unfitness for what might be called a professional career.” A uniform curriculum was now considered egalitarian, and the new conception of equal opportunity emphasized differences among students as the basis for reorganizing schools: “Instead of affording equality of educational opportunity to all, the elementary school by offering but one course of instruction . . . neglects in a measure the taste, capacity, and educational destination of all others . . . In a word, what was intended to be a school for the masses and afford equality of educational opportunity to all . . . serves well the interests of but the few” (Elson and Bachman, 1910, 361).

The new conception of equality of educational opportunity achieved

enormous support because it seemed appropriately democratic. As the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education put it in 1914, "Widespread vocational training will democratize the education of the country . . . by recognizing different tastes and abilities and by giving an equal opportunity to all to prepare for their life work." This ideal provided separate but supposedly equal opportunities depending on students' "evident and probable destinies," as Harvard's president Charles Eliot described the process: the academic track for middle-class students bound for college and professional or managerial work (for boys, and for a few girls going into teaching and nursing); industrial education for working-class boys bound for factories; commercial education for working-class girls heading for clerical positions; and home economics for future homemakers (Lazerson and Grubb, 1974, 116–132). The explicit tracking of students generated some sharp protest—from figures like John Dewey, opposed to vocational education as a form of low-level "trade training" and class division, and from W. E. B. Du Bois, who worried that it would be used to teach black youth "the techniques of a rapidly disappearing era of hand work"—and it seems impossibly inegalitarian to us now. But at the time it represented a commitment of public schools to greater access, and it helped propel educators into the ranks of those supporting vocational education.⁷

As the twentieth century progressed, vocational education in the sense of explicit preparation for working-class jobs became widely accepted. Federal legislation expanded the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 in 1929, 1934, and 1936. Building on the support that World War II generated for vocational education, legislation in 1946 again increased federal funding and introduced some flexibility in the use of funds. But vocational education came in for its share of criticism too, as dissenters objected to the quality of training provided and to the diminution of academic learning. Some of this dissent was implicit—for example, when the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s established job training programs outside the schools, and again in the 1960s when manpower programs independent of schools were created, partly because of the perceived inadequacy of vocational education. Some dissent was more explicit: a 1937 report by a Roosevelt advisory committee criticized educators for promoting narrow conceptions of vocational education, preparing students for a limited range of occupations, neglect-

ing low-income students, and creating a two-track education system. But the report still reaffirmed the importance of school-based vocational education, repeating arguments from the early twentieth-century version of the Education Gospel.

A different development took place during the late 1940s and early 1950s, one that revealed a grand flaw in the vocationalized high school. Once the expanded high school was designed to prepare students for their occupational roles, then clearly one group needed academic education for college and the professions and a second group needed vocational education for skilled labor. But this left behind a third group of students, those bound for the vast numbers of unskilled jobs and thus for whom the role of the high school was unclear. The most common solution, already apparent in the 1920s and 1930s, was to create a third "general" track, neither academic nor vocational, with academic and occupational content degraded into "general" English, math and science for everyday living, and watered-down versions of other courses for students who would never need an understanding of those subjects in their employment. This triple-track "solution" developed its clearest justification in the Life Adjustment movement that arose after World War II. As Charles Prosser made the case (Kliebard, 1999, 204):

The vocational school as a community will be able better to prepare 20 percent of the youth of secondary school age for entrance upon desirable skilled occupations; and that the high school will continue to prepare another 20 percent for entrance to college. We do not believe that the remaining 60 percent of our youth of secondary school age will receive the life adjustment training they need and to which they are entitled as American citizens—unless and until the administrators of public education with the assistance of the vocational education leaders formulate a similar program for this group.

The program for Life Adjustment education included "functional experiences in the areas of practical arts, home and family life, health and physical fitness, and civic competence," as well as work experience programs, all aimed at the bottom 60 percent of students.

Life Adjustment education and other versions of general education—including the general track, career education in the 1970s, and many

job training and welfare-to-work programs emphasizing “life skills”—have come under withering attack for abandoning any legitimate purpose, whether civic, vocational, or intellectual.⁸ But in an economy where a large number of jobs are relatively unskilled—where, as we noted in the Introduction, only 29 percent of jobs in 2000 required education beyond the high school diploma—it is difficult to know what vocationalized high schools ought to be doing for the great mass of students bound for unskilled work. The consistent response—whether overt, as in Life Adjustment, or covert, as in the varying quality of the “shopping mall high school” (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, 1985)—has been to provide low-quality electives and simplified versions of core courses that at least continue the appearance of education.

Other rounds of critique and reaffirmation took place after 1960. A national commission named by President Kennedy in 1963 criticized vocational education for its insensitivity to the labor market and to the needs of many students, especially minority students and women; it tried to broaden the scope of vocational preparation and to focus on low-income students. Findings of another critical advisory committee in 1968 led to increased funding while again promoting more general forms of vocational education and affirming its role for disadvantaged students. Subsequent federal developments continued to stress the importance of serving “special populations” and of program improvement, while round after round of national assessments concluded that congressional intent had not been satisfied. Vocational education continued to be relatively narrow, skill-specific, and confined to entry-level jobs associated with an earlier era: agriculture, clerical work, retail positions, industrial-era craftwork, and the inevitable home economics.

Not until the end of the twentieth century did a consensus develop that traditional vocational education was failing. Both vocational education and the general track, the remnant of Life Adjustment, were overtaken by other agendas. Since the 1980s, the emphasis on improved academic learning and academic graduation requirements has led to declines in vocational enrollment—though not without objections from traditional vocational educators (National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education, 1985). The pressure for college for all also affected enrollments in vocational courses, since traditional vocational education always defined itself as a “terminal” program leading to employment rather than to college. When states began to develop

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accountability mechanisms, they included only academic courses—mostly English and math—which further discouraged vocational courses. While a few high schools and area schools (often in the South) still have serious vocational curricula, most have just a smattering of offerings: a keyboarding course here, a home economics course there, some business education for clerks and retail workers, but very few sustained *programs* that allow students to develop greater skills than those required in entry-level positions.⁹ The real vocational preparation is now academic—the preparation of youth for college, where occupational (or professional) education begins. Those not heading for college are simply biding their time.

Why It Matters

The movement for vocational education may seem like ancient history, irrelevant to the schools of the twenty-first century. The reformers who introduced mechanical drawing and carpentry for boys, and dress-making and domestic science for girls, seem no different from countless other educational reformers who promoted their little solutions only to see them wane—an American phenomenon that David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) call “reforming again and again and again.” And yet the vocational education movement mattered, for it created the comprehensive high school, substantially widened access to secondary schooling, and shifted the goals of secondary education to vocational purposes. As formal schooling including the university became increasingly necessary for employment, particularly for high-status careers, it also became the linchpin of the American dream—advancement through individual effort regardless of one’s background.

A central outcome of the movement for vocational education was a rationale for more youths to stay in school for longer periods. In the first half of the twentieth century, the comprehensive high school found a definitive role for everybody: It prepared large numbers of students (both boys and girls) directly for the labor market, a smaller number of students for college and professional careers, and some middle-class girls for scientific domesticity. The president of the Muncie, Indiana, school board confirmed the dominance of vocational purposes in the mid-1920s: “For a long time all boys were trained to be President. Then for a while we trained them all to be professional men.

Now we are training boys to get jobs" (Lynd and Lynd, 1929, 194–198).

The vocational education movement also fostered a curriculum explosion of highly differentiated coursework. In California during the 1920s, shops, kitchens, and commercial classes became common in schools; Los Angeles high schools in 1930 offered 129 courses in industrial arts, 47 courses in home economics, and 42 commercial courses, as well as substantial numbers of courses in conventional academic subjects. The same pattern was repeated across the country, forming the curricular basis for what would become the shopping mall high school (Kantor, 1988; Angus and Mirel, 1999; Lynd and Lynd, 1929).

After vocational tracking became prominent, ability grouping followed, justified by a rationale similar to that for vocational differentiation. Lewis Terman, usually regarded as the father of IQ testing, complained about poorly performing students who "clog the educational machinery" and argued that tests could be used to segregate them in special classrooms so they would not detract from the education of others. Linking issues of mental ability to vocation, he noted that these "backward students" were "a good argument for the introduction of manual training and domestic science" (Terman, 1922, ch. 1). The differentiation of courses by ability levels created both a "horizontal curriculum," with an incredible array of electives, and a "vertical curriculum" that offered different versions of required subjects for students of different ability levels—algebra, general math, and math for daily living, for example, or advanced-placement (AP) chemistry alongside science in everyday life (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, 1985). The creation of the general education track and the Life Adjustment movement added their own roster of general courses and "life skills," many of which have persisted despite the ire of educational conservatives.

Curriculum differentiation spawned further segregation of students by social class, race, and gender within comprehensive high schools, and gaps widened as working-class youth—both male and female—tended to be overrepresented in commercial and industrial education courses. Black and Latino students were relegated to home economics, agricultural, and industrial education, while middle-class white students remained in academic programs. As Angus and Mirel (1999) have noted, the democratic high school "equalized the opportunity to attend

high school by providing curricular programs that were profoundly *unequal* in the adult roles for which students prepared." The lower tracks put up with the worst teachers, provided a lackadaisical curriculum (either vocational or general) without much pressure for students to learn,¹⁰ and offered vocational courses that led only to low-level jobs rather than to the new occupations of the knowledge economy. Vocational tracks and the general track became known as dumping grounds for those unable to succeed in the college prep curriculum. Creating separate but equal programs, always difficult in an unequal society, proved impossible.

While the high school of the early twenty-first century has largely returned to academic education, it has been thoroughly transformed by vocationalism. It has become a mass rather than an elite institution. It is highly differentiated, in a way that gives much more choice to students but also leads to curricular incoherence and inequity. Many students understand the point of high school to be vocational, particularly since high school dropouts stand little chance of making a decent living. When John Goodlad questioned students in the early 1980s, the greatest number—31 percent—responded that the purpose of high school was vocational, with smaller proportions citing personal development (25.6 percent), intellectual development (27.3 percent), and social activity (15.9 percent). For better and for worse, the high school has become irreversibly vocational.

The Degradation of Secondary Education

The years just after World War II were the heyday of the American high school. The rapid expansion of suburbia, with its dependence on the federal highway system, inexpensive houses, and manicured lawns, was also predicated on good schools, and Americans built them at almost every opportunity. The public comprehensive high school became the citadel of American democracy (Hampel, 1986), defending the American way of life and expressing the triumph of education. It connected students to their future working lives, either through direct training for the labor market or through preparation for college, but it also incorporated civics, history, and other expressions of democratic learning. Extracurricular activities also taught the personal attributes—leadership, the responsibilities of group membership, loyalty, initia-

tive—that led to success as community and family members, citizens and wage earners. Athletics, drama, band, and social clubs connected schools to their communities. High schools became teenage social centers where friendship, competition, and the sexual mores of the era could be explored under the watchful eyes of adults. By 1950, 68 percent of the cohort aged fourteen to seventeen were enrolled in high school, in contrast to 8.5 percent in 1900. While critics complained about declining academic standards in the face of international competition and about racial discrimination in education, the combination of open access, comprehensiveness, and curricular differentiation made the high school an enormously popular institution.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, the high school had lost its luster. During the 1970s, critics lamented the isolation of the high school from the world of adults and the world of work. In the 1980s, led by the report *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the low level of academic learning came under withering attack. Other critics noted the shapelessness of the high school, the lack of any central purpose, the fragmentation inherent in the shopping mall curriculum.¹¹ The high school remained crucial, certainly for students wanting to go on to college, and the costs of dropping out increased as the differences in employment opportunities between dropouts and graduates widened over the 1980s and 1990s. But what had once been viewed as the strongest part of the education system had become its weakest link—and, with the crucial role of college, a weak link at a particularly decisive juncture.

While there are many reasons for the decline of the high school, a number relate directly to vocationalism. Perhaps the most consequential is that the high school has ceased to be a place for any serious endeavor, except for those few students—perhaps 5 to 10 percent—who aspire to highly selective colleges.¹² For the rest, the academic curriculum is something to be endured, since even the pretensions to intellectual mastery have vanished, replaced by the goal of accumulating the credits and grades necessary to get into college. The vocational curriculum itself is not serious, as it is usually fragmented, and even at its best it focuses on low-level jobs without any real benefits in employment; most students drift through the undemanding programs with low aspirations.¹³ And certainly the general track, with its “life skills” and courses designed for those bound for unskilled jobs, has never offered serious options, and critics have been right to poke fun at its courses.

makes it irrelevant

Vocational education has failed at its most important goal, connecting schooling to work. An explicitly occupational school might have established close relationships with employers outside the school, breaking down the isolation of the nineteenth-century academic high school. Instead the pattern has been to establish separate vocational programs within comprehensive high schools, very few of which have work-based components. When a round of criticism during the 1970s lambasted high schools for being too isolated from life outside, some experimentation with work experience took place, but most of those efforts were of low quality—many, for example, provided credit for “youth jobs” at fast-food restaurants and gas stations. They were never institutionalized, and they were blown away by the rush to academic education in the 1980s. Similarly, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994—justified by concerns straight out of the Education Gospel, especially fears about falling productivity and increases in education-related inequality—created federal funding for work experiences in high schools and “connecting activities” between school and work-based components. In practice, however, this led to the minor expansion of conventional activities like counseling, and it expired after five years without much of a trace.¹⁴ Opening up the high school to outside influences has proved difficult, despite its vocational drift and despite the evidence that students value work placements more than other career development activities (Hershey et al., 1998; Stern et al. 1995; Ryken, 2001). Vocational education has failed on its own terms, by its distance from any serious skilled work.

Vocationalism has undermined the academic program as well. Except for the few students vying for places at the top colleges, grades don’t make much difference. The second-tier four-year colleges are not especially competitive, since they accept 80 to 90 percent of applicants. For those whose grades and test scores deny them access to state and regional colleges, the community college is available without any entrance requirements—further undermining any incentive to work hard. (Counselors report that students think performance in high school doesn’t matter since “we can always make it up in community college.”) The irony is that the shift toward college for all, one of the promising features of America’s enthusiasm for schooling, has further undermined the motivation for doing well in high school.

A further problem is the disjunction between student perceptions and the reality of the high school. While students acknowledge the im-

portance of high school for vocational reasons (Goodlad, 1984, ch. 2), the school itself is no longer overtly vocational. Explicitly vocational courses have all but vanished from the curriculum. The academic courses do not seem related to future employment, and the vocationalist question—"Why do I have to learn this?"—rarely has a good answer. Textbook chapters often start off with a "real-world" application, but this is usually a thin veneer on a curriculum of conventional drills with decontextualized skills. Little career-oriented guidance and counseling occurs in most high schools—too little to make students think in any serious way about the alternative futures they face, or about the relationship between occupations they might want and the educational decisions they make during high school. Most counselors preach college for all, partly because they fear being charged with tracking students. The majority of teachers do the same, although a few vocational teachers are willing to be realistic with students (Krei and Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, 2001). All too often, students drift through high school with no clear ideas about the future. They have high ambitions bred by the glistening attractions of American culture, but no clear plans that might help them realize their ambitions. These students are, as Schneider and Stevenson (1999) have described them, "ambitious but directionless," and for them high school is not a serious place to prepare for future options.

The other traditional purposes of education—moral and civic purposes, the preparation of a new citizenry—have been undermined by vocational goals and by the dreariness of such subjects as history and social studies, now the least-favorite subjects. A few students do find real meaning in civic issues, by participating in student government and in trips to statehouses and Washington, D.C.; an occasional social studies program can breathe new life into the curriculum, and various organizations have urged substantial revision of the social studies curriculum.¹⁵ But no one looks to the high school as a place to revitalize democratic participation, and the periodic mocking of student ignorance about history and geography clarifies the ineffectiveness of high school as a place of civic learning.

A powerful consequence of these trends is that many students have simply become disengaged from learning of any sort. This point has been documented by Laurence Steinberg's (1996, 75) study of 20,000 high school students: "Do students believe in the benefits of schooling?"

Yes and no. Students believe in the benefits associated with getting a diploma or a degree, but they are skeptical about the benefits associated with either learning or doing well in class . . . they do not associate later success either with *doing well* in school . . . or with *learning* what schools have to teach. In students' eyes, then, what matters is only whether one graduates—not how well one does or what one learns along the way." John Bishop (1989) has made the same point: what counts in the labor market is the quantity of education an individual has completed, not the quality of learning, and so every student has an incentive to continue as long as possible without expending more than the minimum amount of effort to pass. This leads to overeducation, or more accurately overschooling, in which students get more schooling than they need for the jobs they are likely to get, a theme we develop more fully in Chapter 7. Since academic achievement has become virtually irrelevant for most students, the high school has become a warehouse with a variety of controls designed to hold students until they are ready to move on to college and begin serious preparation for life's goals.

The inequities of the high school also undermine its legitimacy as a place of serious learning. The movement for vocational education promised to provide a place for every student, just as the common school had—if not in the college track, then in one of the vocational tracks or the general track. But the differences among these tracks, including the class, race, and gender inequities that mirror those of the labor force, have made it increasingly difficult to accept the multi-tracked high school as an expression of equal opportunity. Even after the detracking movement of the 1980s and 1990s eliminated a great deal of formal tracking, informal tracking persists (Lucas, 1999). It reflects deeper issues than ways of grouping students, including differences in academic preparation inherited from middle schools, the structure of course prerequisites, variation in the availability of college-track and AP courses, and variation in the motivation of students from different backgrounds in large, impersonal institutions (National Research Council, 2003). Among high school graduates, some have passed four or five AP courses and are ready to jump to their sophomore year in an elite college, while others read at the sixth-grade level and face years of remediation if they do manage to enroll in community colleges. In this world of extremes, it's no wonder that *A Nation at Risk* and other expressions of the Education Gospel have chastised the

HUGE!

schools for producing “a rising tide of mediocrity” of students at the bottom, or that international comparisons find our students on the average lagging behind those of other countries. If the high school has become largely a warehouse, there’s no reason for most students to make much academic or vocational effort.

The most obvious evidence of the degradation of the high school is the high rate at which students drop out before graduation. While Americans were rightly proud of the movement toward high school for all that took place over most of the twentieth century, this vision has been marred by dropout rates between 25 and 30 percent.¹⁶ Recently dropout rates have increased, from about 19 percent in 1993 to about 25 percent of each cohort. These figures are much worse in urban districts and for minority students. For example, Green (2001) found a national graduation rate of 74 percent in 1998, but only 52 percent in New York City, with the black graduation rate 42 percent and the Latino rate 45 percent, compared with 80 percent among whites. A century after educators articulated the goal of high school for all, and well after we have established a new goal of college for all, an extraordinary number of students still do not graduate from high school.

Unfortunately, current “solutions” for the high school are unlikely to improve matters, and may make them worse. In increasing exasperation, legislators turned first to expanding high school graduation requirements, expressed in conventional academic coursework, and then to accountability measures based on standardized tests in English and math, and now to exit exams requiring basic academic competence before graduating. Expecting more from high schools and from students is not the problem; indeed, that is part of the solution to making the high school a place of serious endeavor. But schools have been subjected to accountability requirements without the additional resources to meet these new goals, especially in urban areas. The simple-minded accountability measures are usually different from the standards that states have established for subjects; and the competencies tested—basic English and math, for the most part—are hardly the complex “skills of the twenty-first century” that the Education Gospel has promoted. Some tests—particularly exit exams—are likely to exacerbate the dropout rate, increasing the numbers of students with dire prospects in the labor market. The accountability movement is just “more of the

same”—more of the academic content that seems pointless in a vocationalized high school.

Finding Ways Out

Given the crisis of the high school, particularly the lack of serious learning and the rampant inequities, what are the ways out? First, it is imperative that high schools be reconstituted as communities with a clear sense of purpose, and with something serious to accomplish.¹⁷ What constitutes a serious endeavor should vary, of course, since not all students are drawn to the same goals. For some, it might be exploring literature, or the humanities more generally, even by returning to the morally tinged curriculum of the nineteenth century or to Great Books programs, while others would explore a greater range of literature by women, by racial minorities, by non-Western authors, in what have become standard courses in the high school curriculum. For other students, a serious high school might examine political issues, perhaps using city, state, and federal politics as “texts,” developing political projects in the community, establishing a political community within the high school (Power, 1985), or engaging in service learning. Others might take up environmental concerns, studying the underlying science, politics, and economics while engaging in restoration and conservation projects. Many magnet schools now have themes that combine some curricular choice with focused study: science and technology schools, performing arts schools, health magnet schools, the Aviation High School in New York, an agriculture magnet school in Chicago.

The most appealing theme-based schools focus on a broad occupational area—what we have labeled “education through occupations,” recalling John Dewey’s (1916b, ch. 23) argument that “education through occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method.” These programs typically emphasize an array of related occupations rather than the narrow occupations of traditional vocational education—health occupations, rather than nurse assistants; industrial production, rather than welding. Such a broad occupational focus is elastic enough to encompass a variety of learning, including standard academic subjects, and allows for the integration of academic and occupational education.

These programs have generally restructured the high school in several ways, creating schools within schools, or clusters, that reduce the scale and anonymity of high school, focus the curricular clutter, and often incorporate work-based learning. In almost every way, programs of “education through occupations” provide a distinct alternative to traditional vocational education *and* conventional academic education. As Stern (1999) has emphasized in calling this approach “college and careers,” the programs prepare students both for college and further learning (as traditional vocational education did not), or for employment and future work responsibilities, or for the combination of further education and employment that has become so common. Broadly defined occupational themes also have some advantages over other themes: they help eliminate the disjunction between the students’ occupational goals and the academic focus of the high school, and they help students focus on their future options and on the connections to schooling. The preliminary evidence indicates that these reforms can, when properly implemented, enhance the motivation and engagement of high school students, reduce dropout rates, and increase the number of students who go on to college.¹⁸

Second, creating serious activities in high schools, particularly around themes of some inherent interest and connection to the world outside the high school, would become much easier if high schools were smaller, or if schools within schools were created to promote more coherent communities of learning. The large high school dates from the period around 1900, when the drive for efficiency dictated large schools to realize economies of scale. In the 1950s, James Conant called for the consolidation of small high schools, since he was concerned that only large schools could provide the extensive array of courses, including laboratories and advanced academic curricula, that he believed the most talented students required. In retrospect, it has become clear that large schools with more facilities and more courses miss the essential nature of learning communities. The fragmented curriculum of most shopping mall high schools undermines their capacity to provide any common purpose that might strengthen the desire to learn. In contrast, schools within schools, theme-based schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and schools where teachers stay with their students as they progress hold out some hope that common purposes built on a community of learners can be used to restore coher-

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emphasis
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important?

ence, engagement, and motivation, closer relationships with peers and teachers, and more focused attention to subjects that matter.¹⁹

Third, high schools would be dramatically strengthened by connecting academic learning and school experiences with life outside of school. Increasingly, social studies teaching has turned to student projects to create connections between school and what takes place in political life. Similarly, service learning has emerged as a serious alternative, providing placements out of school and internships that develop a sense of community and responsibility, always part of civic education. For some theme-based high schools, out-of-school activities are obvious: environmental academies can engage in environmental protection and reconstruction, and a school-within-a-school focused on the economic and cultural life of cities can map local cities (Rosenstock and Steinberg, 1995a, 1995b; Steinberg 1998). For “education through occupations,” work-based internships and co-op placements—if they are carefully constructed and supervised—provide other kinds of learning, other teachers (supervisors), and peers (coworkers), along with complementary perspectives to learning within school. Creating a greater array of related activities outside schools would redress one of the great ironies of vocational education: its belief that the best way to prepare youth for work was to keep them in school, disconnected from the workplace. Creating new forms of learning outside schools is not a simple or short-term activity. The struggle of service learning to establish itself, and the demise of work-based learning both in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, indicate that considerable funding will be necessary over substantial periods of development, and that out-of-school activities must be aligned with in-school instruction. But the alternative is to continue the high school as an institution cloistered from political, economic, and community life, to the detriment of students looking for something real to do.

Fourth, secondary schools need to do a better job of clarifying students’ future options and their relationship to both secondary and postsecondary education. Almost as soon as educators began developing vocational alternatives a century ago, some understood that students should be prepared to make educational and occupational choices, and the field of career guidance emerged (Parsons, 1909). Over the years, however, career guidance has been steadily displaced, first by personal counseling related to students’ psychological issues,

then by academic counseling to help students get through required courses and apply to college, and more recently by mounds and mounds of paperwork. The result is that very few students gain access to any systematic career guidance. What little exists either preaches college for all or follows trait-and-factor approaches, determining student interests and matching them to occupations, sometimes belittled as “test ’em and tell ’em.” When counselors do provide career information, it is often in the form of an “information dump,” quite useless for unsophisticated students (Grubb, 2002b; Grubb and Watson, 2002). So while resources in counseling are clearly inadequate, it wouldn’t do much good simply to increase the numbers of conventional counselors. The more promising approaches are embedded in the curriculum, including career guidance as part of “education through occupations.” Another model is the Puente program in California, which supports counselors who work actively with teachers as well as students and parents, and who serve many different roles in helping students think about their educational and occupational futures. The National School Counselor Training Initiative envisions counselors who diagnose problems and work with teachers and students to develop systematic solutions to school issues, rather than engaging simply in one-on-one counseling. Yet another approach is for every adult in a high school to be assigned to a small group of students that they stay with as long as the students are at the school; they maintain regular contact with students and their families to develop a broad view of the students’ needs and ensure their access to counseling and other forms of support.²⁰ But without serious improvement in the practice of career counseling, too many students will continue to drift through high school clueless about why they are there.

Finally, and most difficult of all, the high school will never emerge from its vale of criticism unless it becomes more equitable. We have already mentioned some approaches to equity. Theme-based schools, smaller learning communities, out-of-school activities including internships and service learning, and revamping career guidance are in part efforts to help the least motivated students find their places in the high school. The problem is that too many other school practices contribute to inequality, including the lack of well-qualified teachers in many urban schools; the mobility of students themselves (often caused by housing problems) as well as the instability of teachers, principals,

and superintendents; the chaotic politics of urban school districts; the lack of adequate resources, documented in new rounds of court cases; inadequate access among low-income students to health care, mental health services, and other support services.²¹ The equity agenda requires reshaping the high school’s relationship to both academic and occupational education, but its origins are deeper than the conflicts over vocationalism, and its solutions must be similarly comprehensive. We will address these solutions more fully in Chapters 5 and 8, including health and mental health policies, housing policies to reduce student instability in living conditions, and better approaches to shoring up the incomes of both the working and the nonworking poor. While high schools can reform the practices associated with their own missions, they can solve their most difficult problems only with an equity agenda that extends outside the schools.

In the end, reconstructing the high school requires giving it some meaning of its own. If the curriculum is important only in instrumental ways, as preparation for college or later employment, then it is simply something to endure while waiting for something else. If high school is merely a locus for socializing, then it is again dispensable, since social life can take place in other places, outside of school hours. If the curriculum has no intrinsic value, calls to learn will continue to fall by the wayside, and the threats to enforce learning through high-stakes tests are likely to do little good. The real challenge is to tie educational standards to the world around us, recasting academic disciplines *and* vocational applications, connecting private and personal goals to intellectual, civic, and moral values. Only then will young people better understand that world, and be equipped to explore its richness and to start formulating roles in it for themselves. Only then will the high school reach its potential as the citadel of American democracy and the safeguard of the American dream.

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, ad infinitum.

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 little (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 education in the United States 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.²

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 these questions 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 con-

trol and individual liberty, between political equality and social inequality. In the U.S. 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.³ 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.⁴

Grounded in this contradictory social context, the history of U.S. 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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, for 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. Schools therefore 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, because 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, whose only purpose is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions. The aim is to 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, who sees education as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for 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 differences in social position give rise to 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.⁷

Three Defining Goals for American Education

These three goals of education in the United States 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?

The incoherence and ineffectiveness that result from this standoff among conflicting goals help to explain many of the problems afflicting U.S. schools. But 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 U.S. history for viewing schools as an expression of democratic political ideals and as a mechanism for preparing children to play constructive roles in a democratic society.⁸ For the Whig leaders who founded the common schools in the mid-nineteenth century, this political goal provided the most compelling justification for schooling.⁹ 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 1970s, it has reasserted itself with considerable vigor and effect. This, the most political of the major purposes of U.S. education, has taken three related but distinct operational forms within schools: the pursuit of citizenship training, of equal treatment, and of equal access.

The best single explanation for the founding and early diffusion of common schools in this country is that they were seen as essential to the process of nation building and the related process of training for citizenship.¹⁰ "It may be an easy thing to make a Republic," wrote Horace Mann in 1848; "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."¹¹

From the perspective of the common school founders, the American republic was still on shaky ground in the mid-nineteenth century, 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.¹²

Citizenship training has continued to play a significant role in the ideology and practice of U.S. 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."¹³ Curriculum in U.S. schools evinces this concern, both through specific courses (such as social studies, civics, government, and U.S. 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."¹⁴ As a result of this emphasis the United States promotes general education at even the highest levels of the system, in contrast to other countries, where specialized instruction begins much earlier.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

A second political goal for schools has been the pursuit of equal treatment, which also originated in the concern about preserving the republic. 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 counter-work this tendency

to the domination of capital and the servility of labor," acting as "the balance-wheel of the social machinery."¹⁷ The common school movement promoted these ends by establishing universal enrollment, uniform curriculum, and a shared educational experience for their students.¹⁸ Over the years, this commonality has given way to an educational process that is increasingly stratified according to such characteristics 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.¹⁹ 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 non-academic curriculum options, grade inflation, and the institutionalization of the comprehensive high school.²⁰

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, to incorporate the experiences of nonwhites and females in the curriculum (through the movement for multiculturalism), and to 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.

The pursuit of equal access is a third manifestation of the goal of democratic equality. It is in this form that the goal has perhaps exerted its most powerful impact on the development of schools in the United States.²¹ 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.²²

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, concern about enhancing administrative control, and a stress on fiscal parsimony — all in order to meet the educational problems raised by the sheer quantity and diversity of the pool of students.²³

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 schools in the United States through structural pragmatism — operationalized within schools in the form of vocationalism and educational stratification.

The social efficiency goal has shaped U.S. schools by bending them to the practical constraints that are embedded in the market-based structuration of economic and social life.²⁴ 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. Although 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 coordinating educational content with future job requirements.²⁵ Then as now, the simple reality was that students eventually leave school and enter the workforce, whether or not their schooling has 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 curriculum, particularly at the secondary and (later) community-college levels — preparing students for such future jobs as auto mechanic, lathe operator, beautician, secretary, and drafts-person. 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. Following this logic, Michigan's governor in 1996 moved to shift funds from adult education into job training because, 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."²⁶

Yet the impact of vocationalism on schooling has been much broader than the emergence of an 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.²⁷ The true significance of vocationalism is visible in the philosophical shift that took place in the general aims of U.S. 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, "For a long time all boys were trained to be President. . . . Now we are training them to get jobs."²⁸ 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."²⁹ Other documents in the standards movement have also touted the economic benefits of raising academic requirements. The National Education Goals Panel, for example, asserts in its 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."³⁰

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 given 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 remote and ephemeral compared with the immediate economic loss occasioned by an increase in school taxes. The social efficiency argument may well strike a chord with this group by pointedly asserting that their jobs, their pensions, and their family's economic well-being depend upon 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 — also find the social efficiency rationale helpful because it reassures them that this expenditure is not a waste of public money but instead a sound investment.³¹

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 mecha-

nism 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. Under the pressure to be economically productive, schools have adopted a structure that is highly stratified. Thus the hierarchy of educational levels emerges, 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, for it reflects the vertical structure of the job market and therefore helps to allocate individuals efficiently to particular locations in the workforce: 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 because employers assume that a graduate from the former is smarter and better educated — and thus, potentially at least, a 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 U.S. 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 has become increasingly stratified.³² 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 although 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 limits 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, because society counts on schools to provide the human capital it needs to enhance productivity in all phases of economic life, they 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 be realized only if instruction is effective and learning is universal.

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 providers of educational services — state, policymakers, and taxpayers — and of the employers 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 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 whose 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 collective goods theory, public goods offer people a “free ride.”³³ 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), because 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 everyone, whether or not he or she contributed to the support of these schools or even attended them.³⁴ Childless adults and families with children in private schools all enjoy the political and economic benefits of public schools, according to the perspective of democratic equality and social efficiency. However, one reaches a very different conclusion when looking at schools as a private good.³⁵

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.³⁶

The impact of this perspective on schools is profound. It promotes, for example, the stratification of education — which, as we have seen, 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 and colleagues, in *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.’”³⁷ This can take place only if education is structured in such a manner that its social benefits are allocated differentially, with some students receiving more than others.³⁸ 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.³⁹

First, these consumers demand that schooling take the form of a graded hierarchy, which requires students to climb upward through a sequence of levels and institutions and to face an increasing risk of elimination as they approach the higher levels of the system. The result is a system shaped 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 United States during the past 150 years.⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹

Second, because each level of the system constitutes a 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. 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.⁴² This kind of reputational difference can lead to preferential access to jobs and further education. Which 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 — efforts to redistribute tax revenues in order to equalize per capita school spending, for example, or to bus students across district boundaries in order to reduce class and race discrepancies between schools.⁴³ At the college and graduate levels, the same kind of concern leads to an intense effort by consumers to gain admission to the best-regarded institutions.⁴⁴ Parents are willing to spend as much as \$30,000 a year to send their child to an Ivy League school, where the reputational rewards are potentially the greatest.⁴⁵ As a result, universities must cultivate their reputational ranks to help maintain market position. “In the competition for resources,” said a spokesman at Pennsylvania State University, “reputation becomes the great variable on which everything else depends. The quality of students, 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.”⁴⁶ Within this status-conscious world of higher education, high tuition may be not a deterrent but an attraction, because it advertises the exclusivity and high standing of the institution (which then offers discounts in the form of scholarships).⁴⁷

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 that they want the elementary school to have reading groups (high, medium, and low) and pull-out programs for both high achievers (gifted and talented programs) and low achievers (special education); they demand high school tracks offering parallel courses in individual subjects at a variety of levels (advanced placement, college, general, vocational, remedial); they insist upon 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 a high 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 can forestall early elimination in education’s process of “tournament mobility.”⁴⁸ As a result, parents actively lobby to gain advantageous placement for

their children; and they vigorously resist when educators (pursuing a more egalitarian vision) propose to eliminate some form of within-school distinction or another — by promoting multiability reading groups, for example, ending curriculum tracking, or dropping a program for the gifted.⁴⁹

Because the consumer approach to education is so highly individualized, however, 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 to transfer this advantage to their children through the medium of education. Bourdieu defines the latter strategy succinctly as the effort to transform economic capital and social capital into cultural capital.⁵⁰ In order to pull off this transformation, the advantaged call for an educational system that offers a variety of vertical options that allow them to get their own children into the upper levels of whatever options are available — the top curricular stratum within a given institution (the gifted program), the most exclusive institution at a given educational level (an Ivy League college), and the most advanced degrees (M.D., J.D., Ph.D.). But for disadvantaged families, these upper-level options are a long shot at best, and as a result they may well see such options as a refuge for the privileged that undermine 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, because 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 the 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 they are therefore 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. 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).⁵¹ 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, whose view of education as a public good 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. For the other two goals, education is a form of use value: 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). From the perspective of social mobility, however, the value of education is not intrinsic but extrinsic. 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 Thurow calls the "labor queue."⁵² 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.⁵³ 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; they rarely look beyond the credentials to test this assumption.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ There is a wealth of evidence to the contrary, however, 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 diverge 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 whose skill requirements are largely unchanged).⁵⁷

Consider the effects of all this on education. When students at all levels see education through the lens of social mobility, they quickly conclude that what matters most is not the knowledge they attain 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.⁵⁸

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.

This approach to establishing a fair structure for educational competition takes a meritocratic form in large part because of the dominant place that meritocratic ideology occupies in American life. That ideology captures in idealized form the entrepreneurial traits and values rewarded by a capitalist economy and projects them onto social life in general: the capacity and desire to struggle for advantage in a fiercely competitive social hierarchy, where success or failure is determined solely by individual merit. Whereas proponents of democratic equality have seen schools both as a hothouse setting for the practice of their political ideal (and as an institution that could produce the kinds of citizens required by a democratic society), proponents of meritocratic principles have seen schools as a proving ground for their market ideal (and as an institution for producing individuals who can function efficiently in a market society).⁵⁹

Over the years the meritocratic principle has embedded itself within the structure and process of American schooling in a multitude of ways. The self-contained classroom, the graded curriculum, simultaneous instruction, and individual evaluation — the basic pedagogical pattern of modern schooling — emerged in short order after the introduction of the common school. This pattern was ideally suited to the construction of a model educational meritocracy.⁶⁰ It placed students into groups based on similarity of sociocognitive development and educational preparation, exposed them to the same course of instruction, and then rated them on the basis of their individual performance. The resulting structure, as Parsons and Dreeben have noted, has proven over the years to be an ideal environment for fostering interpersonal competition and individual achievement.⁶¹ By partially buffering students from the effects of ascriptive social influences (such as age and social class), this form of school places students in the midst of a meritocratic game characterized by a degree of formal equality that is unrealizable in real life. It accomplishes this by means of physical isolation from society, a strong norm of achievement as the legitimate criterion of evaluation, an academic curriculum (which provides a formally neutral field of competition), and a set of abstract and distinctively academic rewards.

Of course, meritocracy is much more visible in the upper levels of the stratified structure of schooling than in the lower levels. It is in the gifted programs, the advanced placement tracks, the wealthy suburban high schools, and the elite universities that competitive achievement is most intense; but in the remedial classes, the vocational track, the poor inner-city high schools, and the open-admission colleges, the urge to compete is weaker, and the struggle for academic achievement is relaxed. Students from the lower and working classes see the possibility of social mobility through education more as a frail hope than a firm promise, for the experience of their families and friends is that the

future is uncertain and the relevance of education to that future is doubtful. As a result, they are less likely to plunge into the meritocratic fray, often looking at educational achievement as a lost cause or a sucker's game.⁶²

In spite of the weak hold of the meritocracy on the lower levels of the educational system, however, U.S. education defines itself in meritocratic terms and derives a considerable amount of cultural power from its position as the institution that tries hardest to achieve the meritocratic ideal.⁶³ The impact of this effort on the classroom is profound. We see it in the stress on evaluation—ranging from the informal question-response-evaluation triad that characterizes so much of classroom interaction to the formal standardized tests that play such a significant role. We see it in the stress on competition, over such things as who can give the right answer, who can finish first, or who can attain the highest grade. We can see it in the process of “normalizing judgment”—rating the performance of each student relative to the others on a bell-shaped curve of student scores—that is embodied in that characteristically American form of testing, the norm-referenced multiple-choice examination.⁶⁴ We can see it in the construction of merit-based hierarchies of learners—ability groups and curriculum tracks and the whole panoply of other forms of educational stratification. And we can see it in the emphasis on knowledge as private property, which is accumulated for one's personal benefit (under conditions in which sharing is cheating) and which has a value that is measured in the currency of grades, credits, and credentials.

HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF GOAL ASCENDANCY

At one level, the history of educational goals in the United States is a story of shifting priorities, as particular goals come into favor, then slide into the background, only to reemerge later with renewed vigor.⁶⁵ Such pendulum swings give 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.⁶⁶ In the common-school era (the mid-nineteenth century), democratic equality was the dominant goal of U.S. 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 present but muted.

But late in the century, both of the latter became prominent. The potential for getting ahead via education grew increasingly into a potent reality, and the growing enrollments in the upper elementary grades precipitated a consumer demand for distinctive credentials at the high school and college levels. 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 workforce. As a result, the progressive era (at the start of the twentieth century) was dominated by concerns of social mobility and social efficiency, 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 was overwhelmed by the kind of administrative progressivism that pushed these changes.⁶⁷

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 ability 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 U.S. educational change is a story less of pendulum swings than of steady evolution under the influence of one goal, social mobility—both in conjunction with and at the expense of the others.⁶⁸ Most striking from this perspective is the way that the consumer conception of education has gradually come to dominate the structure of American schooling as well as 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 role played by consumer-generated market pressures is one of the key distinctions between education in the United States and elsewhere in the world. As Ralph Turner has argued, U.S. education is uniquely influenced by a concern for promoting “contest mobility,” with the result that the system emphasizes winning over learning and opportunity over efficiency.⁶⁹ A number of scholars have pointed out the ways that U.S. 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.⁷⁰ And as we have seen, the result is that U.S. education at all levels is infused with market structures and processes that emphasize consumer choice, competition, stratified curriculum, the preservation of local autonomy (for school districts and individual institutions), and a rapid response to consumer demand.⁷¹

The Peculiarities of Social Mobility: Interaction Effects

One source of the powerful influence of the social mobility goal in the United States is its remarkable flexibility. Over the years, people from a diverse array of political persuasions have incorporated this goal into their educational rhetoric. The reason for the heterogeneous uses of this goal can be found in the contradictory elements that lie at its core. At times it works to reinforce democratic equality in opposition to social efficiency, and at other times it works to reinforce social efficiency in opposition to democratic equality.

SOCIAL MOBILITY VS. SOCIAL EFFICIENCY

The social mobility goal for schooling, arising from the values and beliefs inherent in meritocratic ideology, embodies the liberal vision of free choice and limitless possibilities that has helped make capitalist democracy such an appealing model for the organization of political and socioeconomic life. This ideology promises students that through schooling they can achieve anything within the limits of their own desire and personal capabilities. The social efficiency goal, arising from the sobering reality of inequality within the socioeconomic structure, represents the collective limits that confine these possibilities. This structure provides schools and colleges with practical inducements to imitate society's hierarchical form and to adopt educational practices that will meet that society's basic structural needs—that is, to reproduce the current social structure by ensuring that children are competently prepared for and efficiently allocated to the society's full array of occupational roles and social positions. These two visions of schooling—one optimistic and expansive, the other pragmatic and restrictive—inevitably come into conflict over the course of development that schools should follow. In fact, much of the visible conflict about education in the United States has boiled down to this difference between mobility and efficiency. Politically this conflict has taken

the familiar form of a dispute between liberals and conservatives. (A classic example is the long-standing fight over whether to increase the access to higher education beyond the minimum needed to meet employer demand.⁷²)

A key to the power of the social mobility goal to shape the course of U.S. educational history, however, lies in the educational concerns that it shares with the democratic equality goal.⁷³ One of these is a strong shared interest in expanding access to education, and another is a joint understanding that, at least for the near term, schools should be made more meritocratic. For those concerned with promoting democracy, the effort to provide ever-widening access to education is essential for the production of capable citizens who are able to participate politically on equal terms. For those concerned with promoting social mobility, such a trend toward greater access is necessary if everyone is going to have an equal chance to get ahead. Although meritocratic schooling can and does undermine democratic equality by promoting unequal educational and social outcomes, it nonetheless represents progress toward democratic equality to the extent that it introduces individual achievement as the basis for allocating educational rewards in place of allocation based on such ascribed characteristics as class, race, and gender.

Consider, for a moment, the basic political and ideological characteristics that define each of the three educational goals. The educational program for democratic equality has a democratic political identity and an egalitarian social ideology. The program for social mobility promotes classical liberal politics (based on personal liberty, free markets, and individual choice) and meritocratic ideology (promoting equal opportunity for individual advancement rather than equal outcomes for all). The political and social common ground between these two approaches is a territory that historians have generally referred to as progressive—a compromise between democratic and liberal politics and between egalitarian and meritocratic social ideologies. In contrast, the educational program for social efficiency projects conservative politics (grounded in preserving elite political control through the retention of differences in political competency and access) and a reproductive social vision (reinforcing the existing structure of social inequality by adapting newcomers to play needed rather than desired roles within this structure).

The two issues that constitute the area of overlap between the democratic equality and social mobility goals—educational opportunity and individual achievement—define the core of a consensus that has driven progressive educational politics in this country for the past century and a half. A disparate array of constituencies has rallied behind this program. Organizations representing the working class, ethnic minorities, and women have all seen this educational agenda as a means for becoming participants in the political

process and for gaining access to the more attractive social positions. For the middle and upper classes, the progressive program offered the chance to move up the ladder another rung or two or to reinforce an already comfortable social position with the legitimacy that comes from being seen as having earned this position through educational achievement.

The successes scored by this coalition have been extraordinary, including the phenomenal expansion of educational enrollments over the years and the continual extension of educational opportunity upward into the secondary and tertiary levels; the sharp and largely effective attack on *de jure* racial segregation in schooling and similar efforts to reduce segregation and enhance educational opportunities for women and those with handicaps; the dramatic growth in the public subsidy for education at all levels; the explosion in the number of educational course, program, and institutional choices offered to students; the emphasis on general rather than specialized education at all levels in order to preserve student options; the openness with which the educational system welcomes back students who decide to reenter the system after dropping out; and the capacity of the system to consider both individual merit (grades, achievement tests, SATs) and community right (affirmative action, social promotion, open admissions) in determining access to higher levels of education. Most important of all these successes, however, is the strong trend in the United States toward a system of allocating status on the basis of a formal educational voucher of individual merit—that is, hiring persons because of their educational credentials rather than their ascribed characteristics. In this sense, the rise of the credentials market itself is perhaps the proudest achievement of this progressive coalition. As Hurn has noted, allocation by credentials, in spite of its limits and negative side effects, may still be the most progressive option available, because it keeps opportunity open by intervening in the process of simple status ascription.⁷⁴

The primary opposition to this progressive strand of U.S. education politics has come from another complex coalition, the proponents of social efficiency. These include policymakers (politicians and educational bureaucrats) who are worried about the high cost of supporting many parts of the educational establishment when the economic utility of this investment is slight; employers and business leaders who fear that their immediate manpower needs are not being filled by persons with appropriate skills or that they will have to provide training for employees at their own expense; educational administrators who are concerned about how to justify the social investment in schools and how to carve out a stable share of the competitive educational market; middle- and upper-class parents who are less concerned about getting ahead (given their children's reasonably secure future) than about containing the cost of public

subsidies for the less fortunate; and working-class and lower-middle-class educational consumers who are more worried about getting a job than about getting ahead and who therefore want an education with clear and immediate vocational prospects.

In addition, at the most general level, social efficiency in education is a concern for any and all adult members of U.S. society in their role as taxpayers. As citizens, they can understand the value of education in producing an informed and capable electorate; as consumers, they can understand its value in presenting themselves and their children with selective opportunities for competitive social advantage; but as taxpayers, they are compelled to look at education as a financial investment—not in their own children, which is the essence of the consumer perspective, but in other people's children. The result is that adults in their taxpayer role tend to apply more stringent criteria to the support of education as a public good than they do in their role as consumers thinking of education as a private good. Grubb and Lazerson put the problem this way: "In contrast to the deep love we feel and express in private, we lack any sense of 'public love' for children, and we are unwilling to make public commitments to them except when we believe the commitments will pay off. As a result, cost-benefit criteria have dictated the kinds of activities the state might support."⁷⁵

Thus the taxpayer perspective applies a criterion to the support of education for other people's children that is both stingier than that arising from the consumer perspective and also loaded down with an array of contingencies that make support dependent on the demonstrated effectiveness of education in meeting strict economic criteria—to boost economic productivity, expand the tax base, attract local industry, and make the country more competitive internationally, all at a modest cost per student.

For taxpayers in general and for all the other constituencies of the social efficiency goal for education, the notion of education for social mobility is politically seductive but socially inefficient. Sure, it is nice to think that everyone has a right to all the education he or she wants, and of course everyone would like to get ahead via education; but (say those who hold the social efficiency perspective) the responsible deployment of societal resources calls for us to look beyond political platitudes and individual interests and to consider the human capital needs of the economy as a whole. From this pragmatic, fiscally conservative, and statist perspective, the primary goal of education is to produce the workforce that is required by the occupational structure in its current form and that will provide measurable economic benefits to society as a whole. As a result, efficiency advocates (in response to perceived necessity) work directly counter to many of the goals of mobility advocates—holding up

the limited possibilities to be found among existing job openings as an antidote to the limitless optimism of the progressives, and promoting social reproduction rather than political empowerment or individual opportunity. While the progressives are actively raising students' hopes, the conservatives are arguing for the necessity of, in the words of Burton Clark, "cooling out" many of these same students.⁷⁶ Be realistic, say the conservatives; we need only a few doctors and lawyers compared with the required number of clerical workers and machine operators, so schools should be trying to direct students into practical studies that will prepare them efficiently for attainable positions.

The struggle between conservatives (representing the goal of social efficiency) and progressives (representing the common ground between the goals of democratic equality and social mobility) has often been fought in this country over the issues of tracking, guidance, and vocationalism.⁷⁷ Conservatives argue for guiding students into tracks (on the basis of individual abilities and preferences) where they will be taught the vocational skills required for a differentiated array of existing jobs and then channeled directly into these jobs. Progressives see this process as a mechanism that blocks individual chances for social mobility and political equality by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy — predicting a working-class job role for a working-class student and then preparing him or her in such a way that any other outcome is unlikely. The impetus for this form of social efficiency has generally come from the institutional leadership in U.S. education (as agent for the taxpayer, policymaker, and employer), and educational consumers have generally resisted this effort with vigor and considerable success.

The history of higher education in the United States makes this pattern particularly clear. The land grant college, teachers college, and community college were all invented in large part as a mechanism for providing practical vocational training that policymakers and educators felt was required in order to promote social efficiency. In each case, however, students successfully sought to convert these vocational schools into general-purpose institutions for promoting social mobility. They achieved this end by expressing a clear consumer preference for programs leading to the bachelor of arts degree over those that provided particular job skills. These students have understood the status attainment implications of the debate over vocationalism. Vocational training has meant preparation for the lesser positions in the occupational structure, while a B.A. has provided an entree to the higher levels of this structure. Both forms of education are vocational, in the sense of being oriented toward work; the difference is in whether a student's education blocks or facilitates access to the more attractive forms of work.⁷⁸

The end result of this conflict between progressive and conservative visions

of schooling has been a peculiarly American educational structure, characterized by a bold mixture of purposes. On the one hand, education reflects the conservative vision: its structure has a pyramidal shape similar to that of the occupational structure; tracking within this system is the norm; and the system has a large number of potential exit points and a variety of cooling out mechanisms that encourage students to use these exits and go to work. On the other hand, education also has a progressive cast to it: tracking and other school choices are formally voluntary; the barriers between tracks are low; the opportunities for achieving higher levels of education are realizable; and for every exit there is the possibility of reentry to the system.

As a result, high levels of educational and social attainment are a real possibility for students no matter what their social origins. The educational system never absolutely precludes this possibility; its defining characteristic is openness and a reluctance to make any form of educational selection final, Turner's "contest mobility."⁷⁹ Yet the probability of achieving significant social mobility through education is small, and this probability grows considerably smaller at every step down the class scale. Students from the lower classes tend to exit the system earlier than those from the upper classes, and the chances of succeeding grow more difficult with every attempt to reenter the system after exiting. In short, the surest way to succeed is to get it right the first time by staying in the fast track at each step along the way, as market-wise consumers from the upper middle class are so good at doing.⁸⁰

This conflicted image of the U.S. educational system — as a mechanism for attaining social status that offers unlimited possibilities and restricted probabilities — is reflected in the central character of this system's social mobility goal. For this goal occupies a political and ideological middle ground between democratic equality and social efficiency. On the one hand, it shares some of the concerns of the former and, in combination with it, has helped to energize powerful movements of progressive educational reform. In important ways, social mobility has exerted an effect on education that is diametrically opposed to the effect of social efficiency. First, social mobility promotes expanded access to education, while social efficiency opposes that outcome in order to hold down costs. Second, the mobility goal supports the concentration of resources on the highest levels of education (which emphasizes access to the best jobs), while the efficiency goal supports education of high quality at all educational and occupational levels (to provide society with a full range of good human capital). Third, the mobility goal undercuts learning by promoting the acquisition of credentials with the minimum academic effort, while the efficiency goal reinforces learning by asserting the need to upgrade the skills of the workforce.⁸¹

But at the same time, other characteristics of the social mobility goal show a remarkable similarity to the social efficiency approach. The mobility and efficiency goals are both grounded in a pragmatic vision that sees the necessity for schools to adapt to the structure of inequality. Both subordinate schools to the needs of the market. And both lead to a highly stratified structure of education. The social mobility approach to education implies a pyramid of educational opportunity, analogous to the pyramid of available jobs, with the educational credentials market providing the link between the two. This model requires a high rate of educational attrition in order to be effective. Because the top of the occupational pyramid contains only a small number of the most desirable jobs, education can provide access to these jobs for only a small number of students. Allowing a large number of students to attain the highest levels of education would be counterproductive because it would put a crowd at the head of the labor queue, providing no one in that crowd with a selective advantage in the competition for the top jobs.

Education can promote social mobility (and simultaneously preserve the positional advantage of the privileged) only to the extent that it prevents most students from reaching the top of the educational pyramid. It carries out this mobility and maintenance function by encouraging students to exit at lower levels of the system and by stratifying the credentials earned by students at each educational level (via curriculum tracking within schools and prestige ranking between schools). The result is that, in the name of social mobility, Americans have sought to push their education system in a direction that is in many ways directly opposite the direction urged by the logic of democratic equality.

SOCIAL MOBILITY VS. DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY

The social mobility goal has a mixed relation with the three elements that define the goal of democratic equality. Whereas social mobility shares with its partner in the progressive agenda a concern for equal access, it stands in opposition to the notion of equal treatment and it works directly counter to the ideal of civic virtue.

Equal Treatment

As I have suggested, the effort to create a school system that promotes social mobility is antithetical to the ideal of equal educational treatment. The whole point of such a system is to provide some students with the chance to achieve a higher social position by acquiring an education that is somehow "better" than the education acquired by most other students. To meet this purpose, then, schooling must be highly stratified. In this sense, the social mobility goal is congruent with the social efficiency goal. As shown earlier,

stratification has become thoroughly embedded in U.S. schools over the past century, in large part because this kind of structure answers to the demands of both goals. Although much of this stratification took place in response to the perceived human capital needs of the economy—for example, through the introduction of the vocational track—much of it occurred in response to consumer demand. Students who want to get ahead through schooling (and their parents, who want to create possibilities of success for them) have sought to transform common schooling into uncommon schooling. They have actively pursued educational advantage and spurred educators to meet this demand by developing such opportunities.

Civic Virtue

Schooling students for citizenship means implanting within them the seeds of civic virtue. Yet schooling for social mobility undercuts the ability of schools to nurture the growth of this character trait and the behaviors it fosters: devotion to the political community and a willingness to subordinate private interests to the public interest. Unlike the pursuit of democratic equality, the social mobility goal focuses on the needs of the market rather than those of the polity; and unlike the pursuit of social efficiency, it adopts a perspective on the market that is aggressively individualistic rather than collective. In combination, these mobility-oriented traits form a powerful value, characteristic of capitalist ideology; Macpherson calls this value "possessive individualism," asserting that it is desirable and legitimate for each person to pursue competitive success in the market.⁸² This goal has proven to be a strong force in shaping U.S. schools. It has lured students away from the pursuit of civic virtue by offering them the chance to use schooling as a kind of "cultural currency" that can be exchanged for social position and worldly success.⁸³

From the perspective of democratic equality, schools should make republicans; from the perspective of social efficiency, they should make workers; but from the perspective of social mobility, they should make winners. In the latter view, the individual sees schools as a mechanism for producing neither a democratic society nor a productive economy but a good job. The most salient outcome of attending school becomes the diploma, whose usefulness derives from its ability to provide the owner with cultural advantage in the competition for positions of privilege within the social structure. In this sense, then, social mobility is unique among the three goals in the way it has promoted the commodification of U.S. education. For while social efficiency has subordinated schooling to the human capital demands of the economy, giving educational primacy to the vocational use-value of school learning, the social mobility goal has turned schooling into a cultural commodity, whose value arises less from its intrinsic usefulness than from its exchangeability. From this point

of view, school is worth pursuing because its credentials can buy success. And the negotiability of these credentials in buying success is determined by the forces of supply and demand in the credentials market that mediates between schooling and the economy.

In conjunction with social efficiency, the other market-centered educational goal, social mobility has had the effect over the years of radically narrowing the significance of citizenship training within U.S. schools. Once seen as the overarching goal of the educational effort, schooling for citizenship increasingly has been confined to one part of the curriculum (social studies) or even perhaps a single course (civics), while market-oriented practices have become more pervasive.⁸⁴ Citizenship training has become entombed in such denatured rituals as assemblies to commemorate Martin Luther King Day or Presidents Day, the study of sanitized stories in the history textbook, and learning about the three branches of government. As a practical matter, what schools identify and reward as good citizenship in their students today is often just organizationally acceptable conduct—behaving in accordance with school rules rather than showing a predisposition toward civic virtue. This shift away from the common school vision of schools as “republican machines” appeared as early as the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when schools began to downgrade the significance of shaping student behavior by construing it as a way to promote organizational efficiency rather than a way to promote the character traits required for a democracy. Under growing pressure from a meritocratic (social mobility based) vision of schooling, educators increasingly began to focus instead on fostering individual academic achievement.⁸⁵

Classroom Learning

Although the social efficiency goal directs student attention away from civic virtue and toward the needs of the economy, it nonetheless reinforces the salience of learning, even as it reduces the range of useful learning to the limits defined by vocational skill requirements. As suggested earlier, however, the social mobility goal effectively undermines the intrinsic value of any learning acquired in school. For if the ultimate utility of schooling for the individual educational consumer is to provide him or her with the credentials that open doors to good jobs, then the content of school learning is irrelevant. What matters is not real learning but what Sedlak and his coauthors call “surrogate learning”: “As long as the tests are passed, credits are accumulated, and credentials are awarded, what occurs in most classrooms is allowed to pass for education.”⁸⁶ The essence of schooling then becomes the accumulation of exchange values (grades, credits, and credentials) that can be cashed in for social status, not the acquisition of use values (such as the knowledge of

algebra or the ability to participate in democratic governance), which provide capacities and resources that an individual can put directly into practice.⁸⁷

Neoclassical economics sees no tension between use value and exchange value because the latter is assumed to reflect the former. Marx, however, effectively challenged this assumption. In a capitalist society, he argued, the market abstracts social products from their original context and particular function, reifies this abstraction by converting it to a generic commodity, and makes it comparable to all other commodities by assigning it a monetary value.⁸⁸ This is as true of educational credentials as it is of any other social product, such as an agricultural crop, that is created in response to market demand. From this perspective, schooling for democracy or efficiency is like farming for subsistence.⁸⁹ The purpose of the latter is to feed one’s family or community; therefore the farmer has an incentive to plant the full range of crops required to sustain life. Schooling for mobility is like farming for the market. The purpose here is not to grow food but to produce widgets, a generic commodity that can be exchanged for money. Under these conditions, the farmer has an incentive to grow whatever crop will yield the best price on the market. The fact that the farmer’s family members cannot live on soybeans or feed corn does not matter, because they use the money generated by their cash crop to buy what they need to live. Similarly, in schools that operate under a social mobility mandate, students and educators alike have little incentive to see learning as much more than an arbitrary mechanism for accumulating merit points that eventually add up to a diploma.

A large number of recent reports and studies point to the relatively low level of academic achievement registered by contemporary students in the United States.⁹⁰ These writers explicitly or implicitly blame a wide variety of factors for this problem: undereducated and underskilled teachers; distracted, spoiled, and unmotivated students; an educational organization clogged with politics, bureaucracy, and unionism; and an unchallenging, watered-down curriculum. But it is more valid to point the finger at a powerful purpose for schooling that is at core antieducational. By structuring schooling around the goal of social mobility, Americans have succeeded in producing students who are well schooled and poorly educated. The system teaches them to master the forms and not the content.⁹¹

As Boudon has argued, the actors in this educational system are making rational choices.⁹² If the goal of schooling is credentials and the process of acquiring these credentials is arbitrary, then it is only rational for students to try to acquire the greatest exchange value for the smallest investment of time and energy. The result is what Sedlak calls “bargaining” and Powell calls “treaties”—in which students seek to strike a good deal with the teacher (less

work for a good grade) and the teacher has a weakened rationale for trying to hold them to high academic standards.⁹³ As Sedlak and colleagues suggest, the essence of this marketplace behavior in schools is captured by a question that echoes through American classrooms: "Will this be on the test?"⁹⁴ Under the bargain-basement educational conditions fostered by the pursuit of social mobility, whatever is not on the test is not worth learning, and whatever is on the test need be learned only in the superficial manner that is required to achieve a passing grade.

Equal Access

The mobility and efficiency goals for education have pushed the common school goal of democratic equality into a corner of the American schoolroom. Citizenship has largely given way to self-interest and economic necessity, and equal treatment has succumbed to the powerful pressure (from both consumers and employers) for educational stratification. The only component of the political purposes of schooling that still exerts an undiminished influence on the schools is the ideal of equal access. The expansive political hopes of the common schoolmen over the years have become lodged in this part of the original dream. Yet the influence of this remaining hope on the schools has proven to be substantial, and this influence is perhaps most visible in the way it has undermined the effectiveness of schools in promoting either mobility or efficiency.

From the perspective of the mobility and efficiency goals, democratic pressure for equal access to schools has simply gotten out of hand. The problem is that in a society that sees itself as devoted to political equality, it is politically impossible to contain the demand for schooling for very long. Equal access is compatible with either mobility or efficiency, as long as it is interpreted as providing an unlimited possibility for educational attainment combined with a limited probability of acquiring the highest levels of such attainment. Under these conditions, equal access education can still provide opportunity for mobility to a few individuals and can still fill the personnel needs of the pyramid-shaped occupational structure. But the continuing tradition of democratic equality interferes with this comfortable scheme of meritocratic achievement and human capital creation by making it appear hollow for society to offer people broad-based access only to those levels of education that are not associated with the better jobs.

In the late nineteenth century, when the experience of elementary schooling was shared by the many and high school was enjoyed by the few, a high school diploma was a ticket to a good position, and thus access to high school became a hot political issue. Keeping high school attendance at a low level was a

difficult policy to defend in democratic terms, because attendance at that level was precisely what made the notion of equal access socially meaningful. In the mid-twentieth century, the same political dilemma confronted policymakers, only this time the venue was college. If high school was generic and college was special, then college credentials were more valuable, and access to college became the focus of political attention. In both cases the pressure for equal access translated into a demand not just for some form of education but for the level that was most salient for status attainment. And the most useful stratum of schooling for social mobility was that relatively rarefied stratum whose credentials had the highest exchange value.⁹⁵

This pressure for access to the most valuable educational credentials has resulted in the paradox that bedevils modern societies with formally meritocratic opportunity structures: levels of educational attainment keep rising while levels of social mobility remain the same. Raymond Boudon's simple arithmetic model of educational opportunity and meritocratic status attainment demonstrates why this is so.⁹⁶ Politically induced opportunities for higher-level educational attainment have been growing faster than structurally induced opportunities for higher-level status attainment: there are more diplomas than good jobs. The result is a stable rate of social mobility and a declining exchange value for educational credentials.

Contradiction, Credentialism, and Possibility

Ultimately, these three dominant goals — democratic equality, social mobility, and social efficiency — have affected U.S. education in a variety of ways, both negative and positive. On the negative side, they have led to internal contradiction and rampant credentialism, but on the positive side they have also provided workable mechanisms for combating these problems.

CONTRADICTION

One obvious effect of the three goals has been to create within U.S. education a structure that is contradictory and frequently counterproductive. In response to the various demands put upon them, educational institutions are simultaneously moving in a variety of often contradictory directions. For example, we systematically sort and select students according to individual merit and then undermine this classification through such homogenizing practices as grade inflation, social promotion, and whole-class instruction. We bring the entire array of social groups in a community together under one roof in a comprehensive regional high school and then make sure that each group has a distinctly different educational experience there. We offer everyone ac-

cess to higher education (at the expense of admissions standards, academic rigor, and curriculum prerequisites) while assuring that the social benefits of this access are sharply stratified (at the expense of equal opportunity and social advancement). We focus on using education to prepare people for work (thus undercutting other conceptions of what it means to learn) but then devote most of our effort to providing a thoroughly general education that leaves most graduates unprepared to carry out work responsibilities without extensive on-the-job training. And so on.

As a result of being forced to muddle its goals and continually work at cross-purposes, education inevitably turns out to be deficient in carrying out any of these goals very effectively. Pushing harder for one goal (for instance, seeking to promote advanced opportunities for high achievers through development of a "gifted" program) only undercuts another (for example, trying to promote equal learning opportunities for those with handicaps through inclusive education). What looks like an educational improvement from one perspective seems like a decline from another. All of this pushing and pulling leaves educational institutions in a no-win situation, for whatever way they move, they are goring someone's ox. And wherever they choose to stand, they are in a hopelessly compromised situation in which they are fulfilling none of the three goals effectively. Instead they must settle for a balancing act among competing pressures, an effort that aims only to create the minimum conflict, satisfying no one. So if schools do not seem to work very well, one key reason is that we continue to ask them to achieve ends that are mutually exclusive.

CREDENTIALISM

The primary medium through which Americans have expressed their peculiar mix of goals for schools—sometimes mutually reinforcing and sometimes contradictory—has been the market for educational credentials. This market, as Collins and Boudon suggest, is the mechanism that connects schooling and the economy, translating educational attainment into social attainment according to its own internal logic.⁹⁷ The centrality of the credentials market derives from the key role played by the social mobility goal in the ideological development of schooling in the United States. After all, in a school system that is determined primarily by the requirements of democratic equality, the problem of occupational placement is irrelevant, and thus the market valuation of educational credentials has little impact on the way schools work. Conversely, in a school system governed primarily by the demands of social efficiency, the problem of filling jobs is paramount, and thus the credentials market is wholly subordinate to the requirements of the occupational structure; under these restrictive conditions, schools produce the precise number

of people with the appropriate skills for each of the existing job openings. In either case, the result is that the credentials market exerts no independent effect on schools, and therefore inefficiencies like credential inflation—which Boudon's model predicts and American consumers experience—are simply impossible.

In U.S. schools, however, where the standoff between democracy and the market economy prevents the hegemony of either, social mobility emerges as an intriguing alternative goal. Drawing from both poles of the ideological spectrum and blurring the differences between these poles, this goal establishes the credentials market as a zone of individual enterprise, located between school and economy, where a few students with "merit" can make their way. In this zone the dominion of social efficiency is relaxed, because here there is no one-to-one relation between school-acquired skills and jobs. Instead, this relation is mediated by market forces of supply and demand. The salience of the credentials market creates a realm of possibilities for status attainment and exalts schooling as an instrument for achieving the American dream. Portraying the social structure as a structure of opportunity that can be negotiated by those with the most valuable credentials, the social mobility goal puts a democratic face on the inequalities of capitalism. Yet at the same time, this market preserves the probability of social stasis and social reproduction, because the likelihood of getting ahead is limited by the social structure's pyramidal shape. Countering the pessimism inherent in the goal of social efficiency, the credentials market offers unlimited possibilities for status enhancement; and countering the optimism embodied in the goal of democratic equality, this market provides for only one certainty, the persistence of stratified outcomes.

If the social mobility goal holds the crucial middle ground between two opposing purposes for schools, then the credentials market holds the middle ground between two institutions (school and work) that reflect these cross-purposes. In spite of its involvement in the reproduction of inequality, education still represents the political hopes of Americans who see a higher purpose to social life than the achievement of social efficiency. As Carnoy and Levin have pointed out, schools continue to provide Americans with a social experience that is markedly more egalitarian and more open to free choice and possibilities of self-realization than anything that is available to them in the realm of work.⁹⁸ The credentials market, then, necessarily becomes the place where the aspirations raised by education meet the cold reality of socioeconomic limits, where high educational attainment confronts the modest possibilities for status attainment.

The credentials market exists in a state of partial autonomy. Constrained by

the institutions that bracket it, this market also exerts an independent impact on both of these institutions. Understanding the nature of the latter impact is crucial to an understanding of the relation between school and society in the United States. As Collins and Boudon show, the inner logic of the credentials market is quite simple and rational: educational opportunities grow faster than social opportunities, the ability of a particular diploma to buy a good job declines, so the value of educational credentials becomes inflated. This outcome, the natural result of contradictory tendencies woven into the fabric of American life, shapes both schools and the economy.⁹⁹

Credential inflation affects schools by undermining the incentive for students to learn. The social mobility purpose has already reduced this incentive by making credentials a more important acquisition for students than knowledge and skills. But the devaluation of these credentials then makes it seem like a waste to expend even the minimal effort required to pursue surrogate learning and the acquisition of grades, credits, and diplomas. Credential inflation also affects the larger society. It promotes a futile scramble for higher-level credentials, which is very costly in terms of time and money and which produces little economic benefit. Yet because the effect of putting a lid on this inflation would be to stifle opportunities for social mobility, the political will to implement this ultimate solution to the problem is unlikely to emerge. Instead, the credentials market continues to carry on in a manner that is individually rational and collectively irrational, faithfully reflecting the contradictory purposes that Americans have loaded onto schools and society alike.

POSSIBILITY

Conflicting goals for education can produce a contradictory and compromised structure for educational institutions that sharply impairs their effectiveness. These goals can also — through the medium of the consumer-driven mobility goal that plays such a key role in this compromised structure — lead to a kind of credentialism that is strikingly counterproductive for both education and society. The fact that educational goals are in conflict, however, is not in itself an unmanageable problem, but we cannot realistically escape it by simply choosing one goal and ditching the others. Any healthy society needs an educational system that helps to produce good citizens, good workers, and good social opportunities. Preparing young people to enter into full involvement in a complex society is itself a complex task that necessarily requires educators to balance a variety of competing concerns, and the educational institutions that result from this effort necessarily are going to embody these tensions.

But the biggest problem facing U.S. schools is not the conflict, contradiction, and compromise that arise from trying to keep a balance among educational goals. Instead, the main threat comes from the growing dominance of the social mobility goal over the others. Although this goal (in coalition with the democratic equality goal) has been a major factor in motivating a progressive politics of education over the years, the increasing hegemony of the mobility goal and its narrowly consumer-based approach to education has led to the reconceptualization of education as a purely private good.

We are in the late 1990s experiencing the sobering consequences of this ideological shift. We find credentialism triumphing over learning in our schools, with a commodified form of education winning an edge over useful substance. We find public schools under attack, not just because they are deemed ineffective but because they are public. After all, if education is indeed a private good, then the next step (according to the influential right wing in today's educational politics) is to withdraw public control entirely and move toward a fully privatized system of education. Charter schools and consumer choice are the current icons. The word *public* itself is being transformed, as public schools are renamed "government" schools (with all the stigma that is carried by this term in an antigovernment era), and private charter schools are being christened "public school academies" (the title accorded them by law in Michigan). Accordingly, the government is asked to abdicate its role in educational matters while the consumer is crowned king.

Fortunately, the long history of conflicting goals for education in the United States prepares us for such a situation by providing us with countervailing values. These arise from our belief in the publicness of the public schools, a belief that is reinforced by both of the other goals that have competed with social mobility within our politics of education. Both the democratic equality tradition and the social efficiency tradition are inherently hostile to the growing effort to reduce public education to a private good. Neither is able to tolerate the social inequality and social inefficiency that are the collective consequences of this shift toward private control. Neither is willing to allow this important public function be left up to the vagaries of the market in educational credentials. As a result, we can defend the public schools as a public good by drawing on the deeply rooted conceptions of education that arise from these traditions: the view that education should provide everyone with the capacities required for full political participation as informed citizens, and the view that education should provide everyone with the capacities required for full economic participation as productive workers. Both of these public visions have become integrated into the structure of U.S. education.

They are exemplified in a wide range of daily educational practices, and they are so firmly fixed in our conception of school that it is difficult for most of us to imagine a form of education that is not shaped by them.

All of this provides us with a potent array of experiences, practices, arguments, and values that we can use in asserting the importance of education as a decidedly public institution. It enables us to show how the erstwhile privatizers are only the latest example of a long-standing effort to transform education into a consumer commodity, and to demonstrate how this effort has already done considerable damage to both school and society — by undermining learning, reinforcing social stratification, and promoting a futile and wasteful race to attain devalued credentials. In short, the history of conflicting goals for U.S. education has brought contradiction and debilitation, but it has also provided us with an open structure of education that is vulnerable to change; and it has given educators and citizens alike an alternative set of principles and practices that support the indivisibility of education as a public good.

The Social Meaning of Student Promotion and Retention

Everyone hates to fail, children as much as adults. But the possibility of failure is a fact of life that is built into any graded system of schooling. At the end of the school year, a student is either promoted to the next level or retained in grade for another year; and at the end of high school, students either graduate or they don't. The choice is stark and the consequences are substantial. So it is not surprising that the issues surrounding promotion and retention are a matter of chronic concern for all of the parties involved in and affected by this decision — teachers, administrators, students, and parents, as well as the citizens and taxpayers who oversee and pay for the schools. In fact, these issues have been the object of great interest and considerable controversy in the United States since the invention of the graded school in the mid-nineteenth century.

The debate about promotion standards arises in part from issues of public concern. From this perspective, the central question is: to what extent is the practice of retaining students in grade functional or dysfunctional for society as a whole? But the debate also arises in part from issues of private concern. From this perspective, the central question is: to what extent is retention beneficial or harmful for my particular child? The contradictory answers to these questions have led to an array of promotion practices that range between two poles of a continuum. At one pole is merit promotion, which requires