

# *Introduction*

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DIANE RAVITCH

Throughout their history, American public schools have always had critics. In some periods, such as the 1950s and 1980s, criticism of education quality reached a crescendo. But critics have prospered for most of the past 150 years. The schools seldom, if ever, have matched the expectations that society holds for them.

According to the religious tradition that dominated education in the early years of our republic, the schools were supposed to shape the character of the rising generation; the lingering effects of this tradition make it easy to blame the schools (and to add a new course to the high school curriculum) for whatever ails society, including divorce, teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, and traffic accidents. Since the time of Horace Mann in the 1840s, the public schools have been counted on to supply social and economic equality. To the extent that these goals remain unachieved, the schools can be reproached for having failed. There is some comfort in remembering that our disappointed hopes have a long history.

We may like to think reverentially of a golden age that has disappeared, but we need only read Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* to be reminded that "the educational jeremiad is as much a feature of our literature as the jeremiad in the Puritan sermons." Writing more than forty years ago, Hofstadter charged that the schools seemed to be dominated by "athletics, commercialism, and the standards of the mass media." He recited a litany of complaints that included not only "underpaid teachers, overcrowded classrooms, double-schedule schools, [and] broken-down school buildings" but also "the cult of athleticism, marching bands, high-school drum majorettes, ethnic ghetto schools, de-intellectualized curricula, the failure to educate in serious subjects, [and] the neglect of academically gifted children."<sup>1</sup> Critics today, whatever their ideology, would very likely echo Hofstadter's complaints and add a few more of their own. The educational jeremiad is alive and well.

In an effort to examine the other side of the proposition, the 2004 conference of the Brown Center on Educational Policy at the Brookings Institution was devoted to examining hopeful signs of change in American education. Implicit in the topic was the assumption that hopeful signs of change do exist. Yet to counter an excess of optimism, the format of presentation and critique guaranteed that every positive assertion would be met by a critical response.

Why examine such a topic at all? As editor, I made the decision to seek out reasons for hope about the future of our schools. I did so for both professional and personal reasons. Since the publication of the landmark federal report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the nation's schools have experienced two decades of sustained examination and reform.<sup>2</sup> No state or community or school has been untouched by the efforts to improve schools. The upheavals of these past two decades have by no means ended, and it is too soon to assess which reforms have succeeded (though not too soon to recognize that some have failed). Since we are still in the midst of major changes in how we organize, finance, and manage schools, it seems a good time to look for reforms that are especially promising, if only because some sense of success is necessary if we are to continue to pursue important goals and perform difficult tasks. We cannot persist in our efforts to improve our schools if we become convinced that nothing helps, nothing changes, and the status quo always wins. Faint heart never won fair lady, and defeatism never produced success.

In addition, I had personal reasons for deciding to look for hopeful signs of change in American education. I launched the first annual meeting of the Brown Center on Educational Policy in 1997, from which came the first *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* (1998). That first conference concentrated on the question of student performance: How well were American students doing, as compared with the past and with their peers in other nations? Which policies and practices seemed to be most important in raising or lowering student performance? In subsequent years, the Brown Center organized conferences on urban education, the federal role in education, standards, accountability, high schools, and teachers. The present volume is the eighth in the series that has resulted from similar discussions. It is also my last as editor. Having reached the exalted age of sixty-five, I have decided that it is time for new blood and a fresh perspective to carry forward the conferences and *Brookings Papers* into the future. I wanted my last stint as editor to be one in which participants could assay the recent past and look forward to the future with a sense of accomplishment and hope, if indeed such a sense was warranted by evidence.

Tom Loveless, who has directed the Brown Center at Brookings in recent years, will succeed me as editor of this series and as organizer of the Brown Center annual conference. Frederick Hess, of the American Enterprise Institute,

will collaborate with Tom. These men, one trained at the University of Chicago and the other at Harvard, are thoughtful, highly respected scholars of American education, and they will surely bring the *Brookings Papers* to even higher levels of renown and scholarship.

During these past eight years, the annual conference of the Brown Center has established an enviable reputation and has attracted some of the best minds in American education. In a field awash in conferences, the Brown Center meetings have been unusual for their high intellectual quality, for the ideological and political diversity of their participants, and for the lively debates they produce. It is not unusual at these meetings to encounter a mix that includes not only economists, political scientists, sociologists, and historians but also principals, teachers, government officials, elected officials, journalists, school superintendents, state school officers, and union representatives.

The present volume is a worthy successor to its predecessors. Had there been sufficient time and space, I would have liked to have commissioned many more papers, for hopeful signs of change can be found in the expansion of preschool education, the absorption of large numbers of immigrant children, the widening of opportunities for African American students, the broadening of access to higher education, and the sustained attention to quality of education, not just quantity of years sitting in a classroom, among other areas. Given necessary limitations, however, we nonetheless managed to focus during the 2004 meeting on important concerns that give promise of transforming American education in the near future.

In his leadoff paper, Tom Loveless of Brookings assays the reform strategy of standards and assessments that has been embraced and advocated by federal and state officials during the past fifteen or so years. This strategy, Loveless finds, has provided valuable incentives to improve student performance, despite the opposition of some educators and anti-testing activists. With encouragement supplied by President George H. W. Bush's America 2000 and President Bill Clinton's Goals 2000, most states developed academic standards, commissioned assessments to match their standards, and fashioned their own approaches to accountability for students, teachers, and schools. As Loveless shows, this strategy became the dominant federal policy with the passage of President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. Larry Cuban of Stanford University and Robert Costrell of the Massachusetts State Department of Education respond to Loveless's paper. Cuban, a historian, has many years of experience as a practitioner; Costrell is on leave from his post as an economics professor to assist in the standards-based reforms of the State Education Department.

Jens Ludwig of Georgetown University and Brian Jacob of Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University examine the promise of a new generation

of research. Lacking any firm scientific grounding, education research has been in low repute for many years. In the universities, education research commands little or no respect; and in the federal government, it has been perennially underfunded and widely perceived to be responsive to the political whims of the party in power. Ludwig and Jacob herald the advent of important changes that may revolutionize the field. They see promise in the commitment of the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies to support “evidence-based” research and randomized field trials, with the intention of injecting methodological rigor into studies of educational practice.

Ludwig and Jacob also are encouraged by the likelihood that the No Child Left Behind Act—which requires states to measure student progress and to establish sanctions for those schools with students who do not make progress—will create a broad and persistent demand among practitioners for solid research that will help improve student achievement. Before passage of the act, researchers and policymakers had difficulty stimulating practitioners’ interest in the fruits of research; researchers frequently pondered the puzzle of practitioners’ lack of interest in their work. Ludwig and Jacob predict that the No Child Left Behind Act’s emphasis on results—that is, student achievement—will create a new dynamic, stimulating both the demand for and the supply of better, more useful research. Maris Vinovskis of the University of Michigan and Robert Boruch of the University of Pennsylvania comment on Ludwig and Jacob’s paper. Both respondents have written extensively on the subject of education research in general and federal education research policies in particular.

Steven Wilson of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government reports on the progress of what he refers to as brand-name schools. Brand-name schools are directed by education management organizations (EMOs) in the private sector. Most of these organizations oversee multiple schools, usually in widely scattered communities. Wilson focuses on the experiences of several brand-name schools, with particular attention to two of the best known of them, Edison Schools and KIPP. He describes how and why EMOs have become embroiled in political battles with local school boards and with their own boards. While acknowledging that it is too soon to document their academic results with confidence, he predicts that brand-name schools will become a permanent feature in the organizational structure of American education and will provide new choices for children in distressed districts while also serving as sources of innovation. Wilson’s discussants are Henry Levin of Columbia University Teachers College and Jay Mathews of the *Washington Post*. Levin, an economist, has studied education markets and privatization extensively, and Mathews has covered education issues for many years.

Joseph Viteritti, a political scientist at Hunter College of the City University of New York, analyzes the spread of charter schools and other forms of school choice. Although many professional educators have opposed school choice and fear that it will undermine public schools, Viteritti believes that the need and demand for choice, particularly in urban districts, have made it an unstoppable movement in education. He presents a history of choice and reviews the political forces that have advanced it and attempted to block it. Eventually, he believes, parental demand for more choices and better schools will propel greater competition and fundamental changes in the structure of public education. Viteritti's discussants, Herbert Walberg of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Patrick Wolf of Georgetown University, have written extensively about school choice.

E. D. Hirsch Jr. of the University of Virginia assesses the importance of content in the teaching of reading. The founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, which is allied with nearly one thousand schools, Hirsch analyzes the reasons why so many elementary school students falter in making the transition from sounding out words to gaining a mastery of reading comprehension. The greatest stumbling block, he argues, is the lack of solid content in most reading programs. He introduces evidence to demonstrate that children soar academically when their reading instruction includes rich vocabulary and challenging academic content. The great promise of his study is in his conclusion that academic gains in a content-rich environment will trump socioeconomic background, making it possible to reduce dramatically the achievement gap between children from more and less privileged backgrounds. The responses to Hirsch's paper come from Michael Apple of the University of Wisconsin and Martin Rochester of the University of Missouri in St. Louis. Apple and Rochester are well known for their writings on opposing sides of the pedagogical issues that Hirsch raises.

The team of Reid Lyon of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Drs. Sally and Bennett Shaywitz of Yale University, and Vinita Chhabra of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development present an overview of dramatic advances in the field of reading research. Millions of dollars in research funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development over the past fifteen years, they show, have produced a new consensus among reading researchers about the ingredients for the successful teaching of reading. Lyon himself was the main advocate of reading research within the purview of the National Institutes of Health, where both funding and standards of research were substantially higher than in the U.S. Department of Education. The Shaywitzes have been among the leading contributors to the

advances in reading research, using their training in medicine and neurobiology to understand how children learn to read and translating their laboratory findings into useful guidance for classroom teachers. Their work has been amplified by the findings of other National Institute of Child Health and Human Development–funded researchers across the nation. This research, the authors contend, promises to reduce dramatically the current high levels of reading failure among schoolchildren. Marilyn Adams of Soliloquy Learning comments on the paper by Lyon, the Shaywitzes, and Chhabra. Adams is an important figure in the field of reading research. Unfortunately, the other scheduled discussant was unable to participate in the meeting for personal reasons.

The conference, of course, was marked by energetic discussion and disagreement, and not everyone agreed on which developments and trends represented hope for positive change in the future. On one point, however, there was little disagreement. Most participants recognized that large changes are under way in the structure and delivery of schooling.

The most optimistic vision of the future at the conference was expressed by Michael Casserly, the dinner speaker, who described the steady improvements that are taking root in urban schools. Casserly, who has led the Council of the Great City Schools for many years, was candid in acknowledging the obstacles to the success of public schools in the nation's big cities. Yet he drew a portrait of administrators and policymakers who are thinking strategically, focusing relentlessly on raising achievement, and seeing genuine gains from their efforts. Under Casserly's leadership, the Council for the Great City Schools sought and won congressional authorization for an "urban trial assessment," in which the National Assessment of Educational Progress tested several urban areas. This bold move enabled school leaders in these districts to get a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Casserly cited evidence that students in big cities were posting significant gains in reading and mathematics, at a time when national scores were generally stagnant. If what he described turns out to be the beginning of a genuine transformation, this would, indeed, be a remarkably hopeful sign of change in American education.

## Notes

1. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1962), pp. 300–01.

2. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperatives for Educational Reform* (Washington, 1983).