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The Problem of Union Power

Janet Archer painted watercolors. Gordon Russell planned trips to Alaska and Cape Cod. Others did crossword puzzles, read books, played chess, practiced ballet moves, argued with one another, and otherwise tried to fill up the time. The place was New York City. The year was 2009. And these were public school teachers passing a typical day in one of the city's Rubber Rooms—Temporary Reassignment Centers—where teachers were housed when they were considered so unsuited to teaching that they needed to be kept out of the classroom, away from the city's children.¹

There were more than 700 teachers in New York City's Rubber Rooms that year. Each school day they went to “work.” They arrived in the morning at exactly the same hour as other city teachers, and they left at exactly the same hour in the afternoon. They got paid a full salary. They received full benefits, as well as all the usual vacation days, and they had their summers off. Just like real teachers. Except they didn't teach.

All of this cost the city between \$35 million and \$65 million a year for salary and benefits alone, depending on who was doing the estimating.² And the total costs were even greater, for the district hired substitutes to teach their classes, rented space for the Rubber Rooms, and forked out half a million dollars annually for security guards to keep the teachers safe (mainly from one another, as tensions ran high in these places). At a time when New York City was desperate for money to fund its schools, it was spending a fortune every year for 700-plus teachers to stare at the walls.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein wanted to move bad teachers out of the system and off the payroll. But they couldn't. While most

of their teachers were doing a good job in the classroom, the problem was that all teachers—even the incompetent and the dangerous—were protected by state tenure laws, by restrictive collective bargaining contracts, and by the local teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which was the power behind the laws and the contracts and the legal defender of each and every teacher whose job was in trouble.

With such a big defensive line, teachers who were merely mediocre could not be touched. So Bloomberg and Klein chose to remove just the more egregious cases and send them to Rubber Rooms. But even these teachers stayed on the payroll—for a long time. They didn't leave; they didn't give up; and because the legal procedures were so thickly woven and offered union lawyers so much to work with, it took from two to five years just to resolve the typical case. To put this in perspective, these proceedings went on much longer than the O. J. Simpson trial—just to decide if a single teacher could be removed from the classroom.

Sometimes it seems that public education operates in a parallel universe, in which what is obviously perverse and debilitating for the organization of schools has become normal and expected. As Bloomberg and Klein struggled to improve the city's schools, Rubber Room teachers responded with outrage at being taken out of the classroom. Paula Hawkes, for instance, was undaunted by the "unsatisfactory" ratings she received while working. She continued to earn more than \$100,000 a year for doing nothing and said she was "entitled to every penny of it." What's more, she complained, "Until Bloomberg and Klein took over, there was no such thing as incompetence. . . . We talk about human rights in China. What about human rights right here in the Rubber Room?" This, of course, was supposed to be an indictment of Bloomberg and Klein. They were the ones in the wrong.³

The UFT agreed. It strongly supported its members in the Rubber Rooms, comparing them to prisoners at Guantanamo. And it strongly defended all the protections that make it virtually impossible to fire bad teachers, including those that required keeping teachers on the payroll for years while they did nothing. As UFT president Randi Weingarten artfully explained, "All we're looking for is due process." A New York City principal, acutely aware of the bad teachers that "due process" so completely protects, saw the same situation differently. "Randi Weingarten," he said, "would protect a dead body in the classroom. That's her job." And she did it well. Every teacher in New York City had more due process than O. J. Simpson. Because of it—and because of the union power that lay behind it—the city's children were being denied tens of millions of dollars every year: money that should have been spent on them, but wasn't.⁴

In April of 2010, Michael Bloomberg reached an agreement with the UFT to close down the Rubber Rooms.⁵ Teachers unsuited to teach would henceforth be assigned to administrative work or other nonclassroom duties while their

cases were pending, more arbitrators would be hired, and decisions would be made more quickly (in theory). But the teachers would still be paid full salaries and benefits, and, as the *New York Times* noted, “The union did not appear to sacrifice much in the deal. While the agreement speeds hearings, it does little to change the arduous process of firing teachers, particularly ineffective ones. Administrators still must spend months or even years documenting poor performance before the department can begin hearings, which will still last up to two months.”⁶ Observed Dan Weisberg, former labor chief of the city schools and now with the New Teacher Project, “The problem we should be trying to solve is that there are huge barriers that still exist to terminate chronically ineffective teachers. This agreement doesn’t appear to address that at all.”⁷

Educating Children

The purpose of the American public school system is to educate children. And because this is so, everything about the public schools—how they are staffed, how they are funded, and more generally how they are organized to do their work—should be decided with the best interests of children in mind.

But this isn’t what happens. Not even remotely. The New York City school district is not organized to provide the best possible education to its children. As things now stand, it can’t be. Why? If we could view the district’s entire organization, we would doubtless find many reasons. But when it comes to bad teachers alone, the district is wasting millions of dollars because the rules it is required to follow in operating the schools—rules that are embedded in the local collective bargaining contract and state law—prevent it from quickly, easily, and inexpensively removing these teachers from the classroom. Getting bad teachers out of the classroom is essential if kids are to be educated effectively. Yet the formal rules prevent it.

These formal rules are part of the *organization* of New York City’s schools. In fact, they are central to it. The district is literally *organized* to protect bad teachers and to undermine the efforts of leaders to ensure teacher quality. It is also *organized* to require that huge amounts of money be wasted on endless, unnecessary procedures. These undesirable outcomes do not happen by accident. They are structured into the system. They happen by design.

New York City may seem unusual. After all, it enrolls more than a million students in some 1,600 public schools, and over the years it has erected a gigantic administrative apparatus to govern it all.⁸ So its dimensions dwarf those of the typical American school district, and its organizational perversities may be extreme as well. Whether they are or not, however, the *kind* of problem I’ve been discussing here is quite common. Almost everywhere, in districts throughout the nation, America’s public schools are typically not organized to provide the

nation's children with the highest quality education. It is virtually impossible to get rid of bad teachers in New York City, but it's also virtually impossible in other districts too, regardless of where they are.⁹

The public schools are hobbled by many other aspects of their organization as well. One example: salary schedules that pay teachers based on their seniority and formal credits and that have nothing whatever to do with whether their students are learning anything. Another example: rules that give senior teachers their choice of jobs and make it impossible for districts to allocate teachers where they can do the greatest good for kids. Another example: rules that require districts to lay off teachers (in times of reduced revenues or enrollments, say) in reverse order of seniority, thus ensuring that excellent teachers will be automatically fired if they happen to have little seniority and that lousy teachers will be automatically retained if they happen to have lots of seniority.¹⁰

These sorts of rules are not unusual. They are common. But who in their right mind, if they were organizing the schools for the benefit of children, would organize them in this way? No one would. Yet the schools do get organized in this way. Indeed, the examples I've given are the tip of a very large and perverse iceberg.

As a result, even the most obvious steps toward better education are difficult, if not impossible, to take. Researchers have long known, for example, that when a student is fortunate enough to have a teacher near the high end of the quality distribution rather than a teacher near the low end, the impact amounts to an entire year's worth of additional learning. Teacher quality makes an enormous difference.¹¹ Indeed, even if the quality variation across teachers is less stark, the consequences for kids can still be profound. As researchers Eric Hanushek and Steven Rivkin report, if students had good teachers rather than merely average teachers for four or five years in a row, "the increased learning would be sufficient to close entirely the average gap between a typical low-income student receiving a free or reduced-price lunch and the average student who is not receiving free or reduced-price lunches."¹² In other words, it would eliminate the achievement gap that this nation has struggled to overcome for decades.

Boosting teacher quality would also have much broader effects on students generally, and on the whole of American society. As Hanushek notes, summarizing the research, "The typical teacher is both hard working and effective. But if we could replace the bottom 5–10 percent of teachers with an average teacher—not a superstar—we could dramatically improve student achievement. The U.S. could move from below average in international comparisons to near the top."¹³ These educational effects, in turn, would generate "astounding improvements in the well being of U.S. citizens. The present value of future increments to GDP in the U.S. would amount to \$102 trillion."¹⁴

These findings are not so surprising. Good teachers matter, and they matter a lot. Yet despite the enormous benefits associated with teacher quality, our school

system is organized to make it virtually impossible to get bad teachers out of the classroom, bases key personnel decisions on seniority rather than expertise, and in countless other ways erects obstacles to providing children with the best possible teachers.

So why does it happen? Why are the public schools burdened by ineffective organization? This is a question of profound significance, and the nation desperately needs an answer. The broad consensus among our policymakers—Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, from all corners of the country—is that the public schools are not delivering the goods and that something should be done about it.¹⁵ This consensus began to emerge in the wake of perhaps the most famous educational report ever issued, *A Nation at Risk*, which warned in 1983 of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in America’s public schools and led to a frenzied period of nonstop reforms that, it was hoped, would bring dramatic improvement.¹⁶ As I finish this book, however, the era of education reform continues unabated: the dramatic improvement hasn’t happened, and bold reforms are *still* needed to turn the schools around. The most intensive period of school reform in the nation’s history has largely been a failure.

We now have two questions to ponder. To the first, which asks why the public schools are burdened by ineffective organization, we can add a second: why has the reform movement, which for a quarter century has been dedicated to bringing effective organization to the nation’s schools, failed to do that? The answer to both questions, I will argue, is much the same: these problems are largely due to the power of the teachers unions. That is what this book is about.

Before I fill in the blanks, a few observations are in order about what I’m trying to do here. And what I’m not trying to do. Countless forces somehow affect the way schools are organized, as well as the politics of their reform; and any attempt to provide a complete account of these forces—to identify all the myriad, inter-related factors that might possibly have some causal influence—would inevitably conclude with something like “it’s complicated.” But this isn’t very enlightening, and it doesn’t really help us understand what’s happening. In my view, as a social scientist, the way to understand the organization and reform of schooling—and most aspects of the social and political world, for that matter—is to focus on those aspects of the situation that appear to be especially important. The task is not to capture everything of any relevance. It is to get to the heart of the matter.

That is my approach here. I’m writing this book because I think that, to understand why the schools are not organized effectively and why reformers have been unable to do much about it, we need to pay close attention to the teachers unions, whose profound effects on both the organization of schooling and the politics of reform have a lot to do with why the nation is having such a difficult time with its public schools. I am not saying—and do not think—that the teachers unions are solely responsible for the nation’s education problems.

I *am* saying that the teachers unions are at the heart of these problems and, therefore, that the unions themselves and the various roles they play in collective bargaining and politics need to be much better studied and understood.

This book is an attempt to do that. It pulls together a great deal of information on the teachers unions—on their historical rise to power, the organizational foundations of that power, the ways they have exercised it in collective bargaining and politics, and what the consequences appear to be for American education. It also attempts to make sense of it all by offering a simple, coherent way of thinking about all this—an approach that, although as basic as they come, helps to explain *why* the organization and reform of schooling have both become such serious problems in this country, and what can (and cannot) be done to bring about real improvement.

Union Power and America's Schools

On the surface, it might seem that the teachers unions would play a limited role in public education: fighting for better pay and working conditions for their members, but otherwise having little impact on the structure and performance of the public schools more generally. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The teachers unions have more influence on the public schools than any other group in American society.

Their influence takes two forms. They shape the schools from the bottom up, through collective bargaining activities so broad in scope that virtually every aspect of school organization bears the distinctive imprint of union design. They also shape the schools from the top down, through political activities that give them unrivaled influence over the laws and regulations imposed on public education by government, and that allow them to block or weaken governmental reforms they find threatening. In combining bottom-up and top-down influence, and in combining them as potently as they do, the teachers unions are unique among all actors in the educational arena. It is difficult to overstate how extensive a role they play in making America's schools what they are—and in preventing them from being something different.¹⁷

It was not always this way. The rise of the teachers unions is a rather recent development. Prior to the 1960s, the power holders in America's public school system were the administrative professionals charged with running it, as well as the local school boards who appointed them. Teachers had little power, and they were unorganized aside from their widespread membership in the National Education Association (NEA), which was a professional organization controlled by administrators. In the 1960s, however, states began to adopt laws that for the first time promoted collective bargaining for public employees. When the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) launched a campaign to organize the nation's

teachers into unions, the NEA turned itself into a labor union (and eventually kicked out the administrators) to compete, and the battle was on in thousands of school districts. By the time the dust settled in the early 1980s, virtually all districts of any size (outside the South) were successfully organized, collective bargaining was the norm, and the teachers unions reigned supreme as the most powerful force in American education.¹⁸

What accounted for their power? At the local level, their power in collective bargaining grew out of their ability to organize teachers, and thus their capacity to disrupt the operation of schools and hold back the labor of teachers—via strikes (even if illegal), work-to-rule, and other means of coordinated action—if district negotiators did not meet their demands. But the very existence of local organization also provided a guaranteed foundation of members and money that the unions could count on year after year to fuel their quest for *political* power: a quest that was inevitable and entirely rational on their part because their members were government employees working for government agencies, and virtually everything of value to them was ultimately a matter of political decision by state and national officials. Local organization was the unions' power base, but for them to limit their power to collective bargaining would have been a big mistake. They also needed to be thoroughly political organizations and to develop and hone their capacity for wielding political power. Which is exactly what they did, assiduously and with great success.¹⁹

This transformation—the rise of union power—created what was essentially a new system of public education. This new system has been in equilibrium for roughly thirty years, and throughout this time it has been vigorously protected—and stabilized—by the very union power that created it. In many ways, it looks very much like the original system of school boards, superintendents, and local democracy bequeathed to us by Progressive reformers nearly a century ago.²⁰ But what the Progressives envisioned and put in place was a system run by professionals, not a system of union power. This is a modern development, one with profound consequences that make the modern system qualitatively different from the one it replaced.²¹

What makes this seismic shift so consequential for America's schools is not solely that the teachers unions are now preeminently powerful. It is also that they *use* their power to promote their own special interests—and to make the organization of schooling a reflection of those interests. Like all special interest groups, they try to put the best face on their activities. They say that what is good for teachers is good for kids. And as a matter of public relations, they need to say that. But the simple fact—and it is indeed just a straightforward fact—is that they are not in the business of representing the interests of children. They are unions. They represent the job-related interests of their *members*, and these interests are simply *not the same* as the interests of children.

Some things are obvious. It is not good for children that ineffective teachers cannot be removed from the classroom. It is not good for children that teachers cannot be assigned to the schools and classrooms where they are needed most. It is not good for children that excellent young teachers get laid off before mediocre colleagues with more seniority. Yet these are features of the organization of schooling that the unions fight for, in their own interests.

When the unions use their power in these ways at the local level, through collective bargaining, they ensure that the schools are literally not designed to best meet the needs of kids. This is a fundamental problem. But the problem of union power is actually much bigger than this. For the organization of schooling extends well beyond the personnel rules of collective bargaining contracts to include all the formal components of the entire school system, as well as all the policies and reforms that lend shape to them. The issues range from accountability and choice to funding, class size, special education, and virtually anything else that policymakers deem relevant. These aspects of school organization are almost entirely determined by state and national governments, where they are fought out in the political process and where (as in any area of public policy) decisions are heavily determined by political power.

This is where the unions' great strength as political organizations comes into play. By any reasonable accounting, the nation's two teachers unions, the NEA and the AFT, are by far the most powerful groups in the American politics of education. No other groups are even in the same ballpark. Consider what they've got going for them. They have well over 4 million members. They have astounding sums of money coming in regularly, every year, for campaign contributions and lobbying. They have armies of well-educated activists manning the trenches in every political district in the country. They can orchestrate well-financed public relations and media campaigns anytime they want, on any topic or candidate. And they have supremely well-developed organizational apparatuses that blanket the entire country, allowing them to coordinate all these resources toward their political ends.²²

No other group in the politics of education—representing administrators, say, or school boards or disadvantaged kids or parents or taxpayers—even comes close to having such weaponry. For perspective, though, it is important to add that the teachers unions are among the most powerful interest groups of *any* type in *any* area of public policy. Yes, the bankers have lots of money. Yes, the trial lawyers do too. And so do the National Association of Realtors, the Chamber of Commerce, and lots of other groups. But which groups—of all special interest groups of all types—were the nation's top contributors to federal elections from 1989 through 2009? Answer: the teachers unions.²³

Money figures alone say nothing about all the other political weapons the teachers unions can unleash that other top-spending groups can't match. The

trial lawyers have money, but they don't have countless thousands of activists in the political trenches. It is the combination of weapons that makes the teachers unions so uniquely powerful. These other elite power groups, moreover, have their own special interests to pursue and rarely get involved in issues of public education, whereas this is the single unifying focus for the teachers unions and the one arena in which they invest their massive political resources. In the politics of American education, as a result, the NEA and the AFT are the 800-pound gorillas.²⁴

Superior power doesn't mean that the teachers unions always get their way in state and national politics or that they can impose whatever features they want on the public schools. The American system of checks and balances makes that impossible, because its multiple veto points ensure that getting new laws through the political process is extremely difficult. The flip side, however, is that *blocking* new laws is much, much easier, and this is how the teachers unions have used their political power to great effect in shaping the nation's schools: not by imposing every policy they want, but by blocking or weakening those they don't want. And thus preventing true reform.²⁵

This is an extraordinary power with far-reaching consequences. It is a fact of great irony that the most influential call to reform in the history of American education, *A Nation at Risk*, burst onto the scene precisely when the teachers unions were consolidating their hold over the system and its politics. For the past quarter century, our nation has been dedicated to improving the public schools and boosting student achievement. Yet the hopes and dreams of reformers have been dashed, almost at every turn. Serious efforts at fundamental change—real accountability, real choice, pay for performance—are seen as major threats by the teachers unions. And they have used their power to stifle progress.

At the same time, the teachers unions have thrown their support behind mainstream approaches that carry the label of reform—bigger budgets, across-the-board raises, stronger certification, smaller classes (which require hiring more teachers), and the like—but leave the existing system, its perversities, and all of its jobs entirely safe and intact. Needless to say, these inside-the-box “reforms” have not led to significant improvement. America's schools are still not organized in the best interests of children. The reform era, stunted by union opposition, has not changed that.²⁶

Throughout, the teachers unions have relied upon their alliance with the Democratic Party to gum up the reform process. This alliance makes good political sense, because both sides have much to gain from it. Democratic candidates receive almost all of the unions' substantial political contributions, their in-the-trenches manpower, and their public relations machinery for conducting electoral campaigns—resources that are enormously valuable. In return, the unions can usually count on the Democrats to go to bat for them in the policy process:

by insisting on bigger budgets, higher salaries, job protections, and other union-favored objectives—and, most important, by standing in the way of major reform. The teachers unions are the raw power behind the politics of blocking. The Democrats do the blocking.

Some of my Democratic readers may not like to hear such a thing, and may suspect that I am a Republican with an ax to grind. But I am not a Republican, and I have no stake in trashing the Democrats. My aim here is to understand the role of the teachers unions in American education and simply to tell it like it is. I don't care which party looks good or which party looks bad. I do care about getting the story right and presenting an accurate, unvarnished account.

I single out the Democrats for two reasons. First, the long-standing alliance between the teachers unions and the Democrats is absolutely central to this nation's politics of education, and any effort to understand what happens in the political process and why the era of reform has proved such a deep disappointment needs to pay serious attention to it. The failure of reform can't be attributed to a "lack of political will" or the complexity of the school system or too little money. It is, at its heart, a problem of power and self-interest. Reform has failed mainly because powerful interests, the teachers unions, *want* it to fail—and those interests are faithfully represented by the Democrats, who cast the official votes.

The second reason for highlighting this alliance is that the Democrats ought to be the party of education reform. Their history and ideals are progressive: they are the party of the New Deal, of civil rights, of Medicare, of poverty programs, of universal health care. They have always prided themselves, quite rightly, on standing up for the working class and the disadvantaged, and these are their core constituencies. In education, moreover, it is precisely *their* constituents—disadvantaged kids and families—who are stuck in the nation's worst schools and desperate for reform. But while the Democrats have been champions of the disadvantaged in virtually every other area of public policy, education is a glaring exception. In education, and in education alone, the Democrats are the party of conservatism. Throughout the modern era they have been immobilized, unable to pursue major change. Their alliance with the teachers unions has taken true reform off the table.²⁷

With the teachers unions so powerful and with many Democrats sandbagging change, the reformist era never had a chance. And so, after a quarter century of perpetual reformist activity and rhetoric, the basic structure of the American education system remains pretty much the same, and its performance remains troubling:

—Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that achievement growth over the last thirty-five years has been modest (indeed, virtually nil for seventeen year olds) and that most of our children

simply do not know what they need to know.²⁸ This, despite the fact that the nation is spending more than *twice* as much on education—per student, adjusted for inflation—as it spent in 1970 (and more than three times as much as in 1960).²⁹ In the wake of all this money, the 2009 NAEP study of reading proficiency among eighth graders showed that just 16 percent were proficient in Chicago, 10 percent in Baltimore City, and 7 percent in Detroit. How can kids learn if they can't even read?³⁰

—Many urban school districts are in crisis, often failing to graduate even half of their students. The most recent figures (which are for 2007) show that the graduation rate is just 41 percent in Los Angeles, 46 percent in Albuquerque, and 48 percent in Philadelphia and Milwaukee.³¹

—Minority children consistently score much lower on tests of student achievement than white children do, and the differences are huge. On the 2009 NAEP examination, for example, black seventeen year olds—those who were still in school, which doesn't even account for the many who had dropped out—scored at about the same level as white thirteen year olds in reading.³²

—Compared to students in other developed countries (members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD), American students score above average in the early grades, but they lose ground by the middle school years and are near the bottom of the rankings by high school. In the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) international study of fifteen year olds for 2009, released in December of 2010, the United States ranked fourteenth in reading, twenty-sixth in math, and sixteenth in science when compared with other OECD countries—and it was vastly outscored on all three dimensions by Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, which are not members of the OECD.³³ There is, however, one area in which the United States stands out: it *spends* more per pupil than almost any other developed nation.³⁴

—Surveys of U.S. employers reveal a widespread perception that workers are too poorly educated to handle the flexibility and autonomy of the modern workplace. A 2009 survey of human resources professionals found that 44 percent rated recent high school graduates as “deficiently” prepared for even entry-level jobs.³⁵

We all know, and have known for decades, why reform is necessary. Without good schools, the nation's children are less able to lead productive lives, to participate as informed citizens, or to realize their potential as human beings. Without good schools, social inequity persists and festers, as children who are poor and minority are systematically denied the opportunities that only quality education can provide, and are at risk for being unemployed, getting involved in drugs and crime, going to prison, and even dying at an early age. Without good schools, the nation as a whole is denied the latent talents and contributions of its people and cannot flourish as it should—in its economy, its society, its democracy.

These problems are all the more serious in international context. We live in an unforgiving world of global competition, technological change, and the rise of new economic superpowers—China, India, Brazil, and perhaps others. If the United States wants to maintain its economic preeminence and its status as a world leader, its success will depend most critically on its own human resources, and on having the kind of trained, flexible, well-educated workforce that the public schools are failing to provide.³⁶

Defenders of the public school system often argue that our nation's low student performance is rooted in social factors—poverty, broken families, lack of health care, and poor nutrition—and that academic failure is the fault of society and its inequities.³⁷ There is, of course, some truth to this argument. It is quite true that millions of America's children are burdened by serious social disadvantages and that these problems affect their achievement.³⁸ It is also true that educators and reformers—and the teachers unions—are not responsible for the dysfunctions of our larger society. They are not responsible for poverty. They are not responsible for broken families. They are not responsible for inadequate health care and poor nutrition.

But what is the solution, if we want to significantly boost the achievement of America's children? The solution, many defenders say, is to stop blaming the schools for poor performance and to make attacking these social ills the top priority of American education reform. The real challenge of education reform, by these lights, is not to restructure the school system, but rather to ameliorate poverty, educate parents, and make schools into community service centers that can meet an array of health, dental, nutritional, psychological, family, and other social needs.³⁹

Acting against society's inequities is a noble enterprise and a necessary one. But it cannot be allowed to distract from the pursuit of effective schools. Realistically, the education reform movement cannot be expected to solve all of society's problems. If that were its mission, it would never get around to fixing the very things in its own backyard—namely, the public schools—that it *can* fix. Yes, social inequities create disadvantages for many students. This is unfortunate, and something should be done about it. But still, the fact is that schools do have a big impact—their own independent impact, over and above the effects of social factors—on how much students learn. And *all children can learn*, including children laboring under social disadvantages. The distinctive challenge of American education reform is to make the public schools as effective as they can possibly be, so that America's children—all of them—can achieve at the highest levels.

Consider the remarkable track record of KIPP schools. Pioneered by Teach for America grads Mike Feinberg and David Levin, KIPP began in 1995 with two small charter schools, one in Houston and one in the South Bronx, dedicated to providing disadvantaged kids with quality education. It is now a national

network of ninety-nine charter schools operating in twenty states and the District of Columbia, enrolling more than 26,000 students. Of these, 90 percent are African American or Latino.⁴⁰ The KIPP organizational model—followed in all of its schools—looks nothing like what we normally see in the regular public schools. KIPP schools are not unionized, and they can organize as they see fit. More time is devoted to learning: a longer school day (nine hours), a longer school week (half days on Saturday), and three weeks of school in the summer. Principals have control over budgets and personnel and thus are free to allocate funds to their best uses, to hire the best teachers they can find, and to weed out those who don't prove to be effective. Teachers, like students, put in many more hours—including being available at night, via cell phone, to help students with their homework—but they are also paid more than their counterparts in the regular schools. Students are held to uniformly high academic expectations and a strict behavioral code.

The results? Although KIPP students tend to be well behind district averages in achievement when they enter, their schools empower them to make extraordinary gains—gains that, according to an independent evaluation by Mathematica, are so large that they virtually wipe out the usual achievement gap separating disadvantaged from more advantaged kids.⁴¹ Among KIPP's eighth grade graduates, moreover, a stunning 88 percent eventually go on to college.⁴² And KIPP is not unique. A similar story of spectacular success with disadvantaged kids could be told for Aspire Public Schools—the largest charter network in California—whose twenty-five schools boast some of the most impressive test scores in the state and collectively outperform *every* large California school district with majority high-poverty enrollments.⁴³

Social inequities are serious and consequential in this country. But it is a mistake to think that, because this is so, the public schools can somehow be held blameless when they fail to perform. There is no excuse for ineffective schools. Schools *can* be effectively organized. Disadvantaged kids *can* achieve at levels comparable to those of kids who are not disadvantaged. The challenge of American education reform is to *avoid* putting the blame on poverty or broken homes and to insist upon—and create—genuinely effective schools for all children.⁴⁴ Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sums it up succinctly: “It’s obvious the system’s broken. Let’s admit it’s broken, let’s admit it’s dysfunctional, and let’s do something dramatically different, and let’s do it now. But don’t just tinker about the edges. Don’t just play with it. Let’s fix the thing.”⁴⁵

For the last quarter century, the United States has struggled to meet this challenge. And it has failed. The teachers unions are not solely responsible for that failure. But as the single most powerful group in American education by many orders of magnitude, they have played an integral role in it. Through their bottom-up power in collective bargaining, they have burdened the schools with

perverse organizations that are literally not designed for effective education. Through their top-down power in the political process, they have blocked or weakened sensible reforms that attempt to bring change and improvement. The combination is devastating, creating a vise-like grip in which the nation's schools are systematically squeezed—and shaped to their organizational core—by the special interests of the adults who work in them.

From the beginning of the reform era, reformers have focused on the problem of ineffective schools, and thus on fixing the schools themselves. Yet they have failed to resolve this problem because there is *another* problem—the problem of union power—that is more fundamental, and has *prevented* them from fixing the schools in ways that make sense and have real promise. If our nation ever hopes to transform the public schools, this problem of union power must be recognized for what it is. And it must be resolved.

This simple point has been something of a third rail in the education reform movement. Until the last few years, most reformers haven't dared to touch it. Conservatives have been the exception: they have never been ideologically or politically wedded to the unions, and so have been free to criticize them. But most Democrats, liberals, and moderates, including the leaders of civil rights groups, others representing the disadvantaged, and many key people in think tanks and foundations, have gone out of their way to avoid saying anything that might put the unions in a negative light. Even when the facts have been staring them in the face.

This reticence is changing, as I discuss, but it hasn't gone away. Not by a long shot. Many of these players are ideologically sympathetic to unions, believe in collective bargaining (for all workers, not just teachers), and can't imagine having an education system that isn't thoroughly unionized. Others, particularly Democratic office holders, are politically dependent on the teachers unions and have incentives to be supportive (and stifle criticism). Still others, especially those in think tanks and foundations, are desperate to appear objective and balanced in the eyes of all "stakeholders."

The result is that, for decades, most reformers have basically ignored the elephant in the room. The reform movement has not been about the unions, and has not tackled the problem of union power at all. So it is hardly surprising that, in trying to transform the schools, it has made very little progress.

Resolving the Problem

The pivotal question for the future of American education is, will the problem of union power ever get resolved so that the nation's schools can actually be organized in the best interests of children? The answer, I believe, is yes. I explain why

in the final chapter and leave the details for then. Here, very briefly, is what they come down to.

In the near term, union power will remain the reality. When a group is truly powerful, as the teachers unions are, efforts to undermine their power—by prohibiting collective bargaining in the schools, say—face formidable obstacles in the political process. Precisely because the unions already *are* powerful, they can almost always *use* their power to block these sorts of attacks. This is the baseline that any forecast of the future needs to deal with. Power is its own protection. It perpetuates itself. And this is true in any area of public policy, not just in education. The status quo is not stable by accident. It is stable because it is protected—by power. And power is stable because it is protected—by itself.

In normal times, reformers who try to change the system or its underlying power structure will almost always lose. Yet fortunately for the nation, these are *not* normal times. American education stands at what political scientists would call a critical juncture. Due to a largely accidental and quite abnormal confluence of events, the stars are lining up in a unique configuration that makes major change possible, and in fact will drive it forward. Two separate dynamics are at work. Both are already under way, but in their early stages.⁴⁶

The first is arising “endogenously”—that is, it is arising *within* the education system and its politics—and should be readily apparent to anyone who has been following public education in recent years. More than at any other time in modern history, the teachers unions are on the defensive: blamed for obstructing reform, defending bad teachers, imposing seniority rules, and in general, using their power to promote their own interests rather than the interests of kids and effective organization. The key change, though, is that open criticism is coming not simply from conservatives, but also from liberals, moderates, and Democrats.

A struggle is going on within the Democratic Party. Key constituencies—notably, groups that represent the disadvantaged, along with leading liberal and moderate opinion leaders, such as the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, the *New Republic*, and well-known columnists and education observers—have become fed up. Fed up with perpetually abysmal schools for disadvantaged kids. Fed up with the party’s perpetual impotence with regard to reform. Fed up with what Jonathan Alter (of *Newsweek*) has called the “stranglehold of the teachers unions on the Democratic Party.”⁴⁷ The demand is palpable for the party to free itself to pursue serious education reform in the best interests of children, especially those who need it the most. As Newark Mayor Cory Booker explained to a huge crowd at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, “We have to understand that as Democrats we have been wrong on education, and it’s time to get it right.”⁴⁸

When the Democrats captured the presidency in 2009, the reformers apparently did too. President Barack Obama has attempted to take the lead, together

with his reform-minded secretary of education, Arne Duncan, in putting the party on a very different educational path, one that the teachers unions do not like and have resisted for decades. His education agenda and its most forceful vehicle, the Race to the Top (which I discuss at length), are striking reflections of this reformist surge that is reshaping the contours of the Democratic Party. And the frenzy of reformist activity that they produced across the states in 2009 and 2010 is a striking indication of what can happen when the Democrats stop blocking reform and start promoting it.⁴⁹

If all this wasn't bad enough for the unions, they took another hit in late 2010 with the release of *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary by Davis Guggenheim, who had won an Academy Award in 2007 for *An Inconvenient Truth*, about the crisis of global warming, and had now turned his attention to public education. In *Superman*, Guggenheim tells a heart-wrenching story of struggle and hope—and ultimately of crushing disappointment and searing inequity—about poor, minority families trying desperately to save their children's lives by escaping from their abysmal local schools. Along the way, he provides an avalanche of facts and figures on the problems of American education. And the teachers unions are featured, often through graphic footage, as heavily responsible—through their protection of bad teachers, their seniority rules, their opposition to charters, and more—for the sorry state of the system and for making change so difficult. It is no doubt a sign of the times that this film appeared at all. And even more so that, when it did, it received sensational coverage in the media. People were clearly ready to hear its message and, rather than dismiss it as antiunion—Guggenheim himself is politically liberal and a union member—to see it as a serious-minded revelation that the teachers unions actually *are* creating problems for the public schools. And for disadvantaged children and their families.⁵⁰

This shift in the political tides is historic, and it is likely to continue. Even so, it *will not be enough* in future years, on its own, to bring about major education reform. Modest reform, yes. A real transformation, no. The brute fact is that, while the shifting tides will help to isolate the unions and force them into compromises they'd rather not make—indeed, this is happening even now—there is nothing here to subvert the fundamentals of their power. Absent some *other* dynamic, they will remain very powerful, with over 4 million members, tons of money, countless activists, and all their other weapons still intact; and the Democrats will continue to court their support and worry about alienating them. They will resist efforts to take the unions' power away. And they will only push reform so far before pulling up short.

This built-in resistance is exacerbated by a set of beliefs, widespread among Democrats and many in the reform community, that I refer to by the shorthand of “reform unionism” (and devote an entire chapter to). The basic notion is that the *power* of the unions is not itself a problem because, with sufficient

enlightenment and pressure, union leaders can eventually be convinced to forgo their self-interested ways and start *using* their power to do what's best for children. In the end, by these lights, the nation can have collective bargaining, powerful unions, *and* schools that are organized to be maximally effective. For reasons I explain later, this line of thinking is unfounded. It is a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too vision of the future that flatly misunderstands the fundamentals of union behavior. Nonetheless, it is surprisingly influential, and it prompts Democrats to pursue "reforms" that are inherently limited and flawed.⁵¹

Luckily, the ferment within the Democratic Party is not the only dynamic at work here. Another, completely separate dynamic is occurring at the same time. This one is an "exogenous" force—arising entirely from *outside* the educational and political systems—that will ultimately dovetail nicely with the political trends I've just discussed and generate a total effect that is devastating and decisive.

What I'm talking about here is the revolution in information technology: one of the most profoundly influential forces ever to hit this planet. It is fast transforming the fundamentals of human society, from how people communicate and interact to how they collect information, gain knowledge, and transact business. There is no doubt that it has the capacity to transform the way children learn, and that it will ultimately revolutionize education systems all around the world, including our own. John Chubb and I have explored these matters in great detail in a recent book, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education*.⁵²

As we argue in *Liberating Learning*, education technology is not a reform. It is not a new law. Reforms and laws are small things by comparison, and they can be blocked. Education technology is a tsunami that is only now beginning to swell, and it will hit the educational world—and the American public school system—with full force over the next decade and those to follow. The teachers unions can't stop it, although they will try (and, in fact, are already doing their best to keep it at bay through the politics of blocking). It is much bigger and more powerful than they are.

I leave the details for later. The key point is that the specific kinds of changes wrought by technology—among them, the massive substitution of technology for labor, the growing irrelevance of geography for teaching (which means that teachers can be anywhere, and no longer need to be concentrated in districts), and the huge expansion in attractive alternatives to the regular (unionized) public schools—are going to undermine the very foundations of union power, and make it much more difficult for them to block reform and impose their special interests through politics. This will lay the groundwork, over a period of decades, for truly massive reforms—and for the rise of a new system of American education: one that is much more responsive to the needs of children and much better organized to provide them with the quality education they deserve.⁵³

Long term, then, the problem of union power will be resolved, and reform will come to fruition. But it will only happen because of a historical accident, a force from the outside that will hit with explosive impact. Were the system's fate left up to the self-generated forces from within, the future would look very different indeed. And not nearly as bright.

Thinking about Unions and Public Education

Although the teachers unions have tremendous influence over the nation's schools, they have been very poorly studied. Indeed, during the entire reform era of the last quarter century, which saw literally hundreds of governmental and academic reports on how to improve the schools—many of which provided the basis for new reform legislation at both the state and national levels—the teachers unions have almost always been completely ignored as targets of reform, as though they are simply irrelevant to an assessment of problems and solutions.⁵⁴ This is a remarkable state of affairs, and a debilitating one for a nation desperate for effective schools.

The research situation has improved a bit in recent years, as more scholars and policy organizations—among them the New Teacher Project and the National Council on Teacher Quality—have begun to explore collective bargaining contracts and other aspects of union influence.⁵⁵ But all in all, the research literature is quite sparse indeed; and aside from rare studies, the teachers unions are mostly flying under the scholarly radar screen.

My purpose in this book is to bring the unions fully into view, and to shed light on the pivotal roles they play in public education generally. For the most part, I do this by providing pertinent information. But despite what people often think, the facts do not really speak to us. We need a way to make sense of them, a perspective for understanding what is going on. So I want to do more here than describe what is happening. I also want to explain *why* it is happening.

How to do that? I have been studying politics for a long time, and a good portion of my writing and research over the years has not been about public education, but rather about the presidency, the bureaucracy, Congress, interest groups, and political institutions more generally. All of this work, regardless of its specific subject matter, has the *same* analytic orientation—an orientation characteristic of what political scientists often refer to as “institutionalism.” When I study education, then, I do not approach the subject in an idiosyncratic way that is somehow peculiar to education. I approach it in the same way I approach any institutional subject. And this is typical of what political scientists do throughout the discipline: institutionalism provides them with an analytic basis for approaching whatever institutions they happen to be

studying—because it is designed to capture and explore the essence of what institutions in general are about.⁵⁶

This book on the teachers unions is not intended to be theoretical, and it is not targeted at an audience of academics. So the institutional tools I employ here are quite basic. But they are also important for helping us think about the teachers unions—as well as their political and educational contexts—in a simple, clear, and focused way.

To see what this entails, let's begin by considering members of Congress. They are well known for engaging in pork barrel politics, and more generally for crafting legislation to advance the special interests of favored constituents and powerful groups and companies. Of the many ways they ply their trade, one is through the use of “earmarks” in appropriations bills. Perhaps the most infamous is the \$225 million provision for the “Bridge to Nowhere”—linking an Alaska town of 14,000 to an island of just fifty people—inserted in an appropriations bill by Alaska Senator Ted Stevens.⁵⁷ But the “Bridge to Nowhere” is just an egregious example of a common practice. The \$1.1 trillion omnibus appropriations bill passed by Congress in December of 2009 contained more than 5,000 earmarks. The 2009 economic stimulus bill, which was Congress's opportunity to craft a potent, finely tuned program to boost an economy out of near-depression, was larded up with some 9,000 special interest earmarks—making it a Christmas tree bill that didn't even come close to providing a coherent economic program.⁵⁸

As I write this, congressional Republicans have chosen to make earmarks a symbol of fiscal irresponsibility and are pressing for a “moratorium” that would (temporarily) end the practice. Maybe they will succeed, maybe they won't. But it doesn't matter, because earmarks are small potatoes—just one half of 1 percent of the federal budget—and members of Congress have many other, much more potent means of pursuing special interests.⁵⁹ Consider the nation's tax law, for example. It is filled with hundreds of special interest deductions and credits—generating benefits for oil companies, timber growers, NASCAR racetracks, you name it—that add up to some \$1.2 trillion a year, almost as much as the entire budget. The tax code is crucial to the nation's economic growth and well-being, and should be designed as one of the linchpins of national economic policy; but instead, Congress uses it as a political vehicle for targeting benefits to special interests.⁶⁰ Or consider agriculture. The nation clearly needs an efficient farming sector, but Congress has long supported an archaic, grossly inefficient system of farm subsidies that pumps billions of dollars per year into the coffers of large farms and agribusinesses (while most farmers receive nothing).⁶¹ Or consider the defense arena, where the nation's security hangs in the balance and one might think common interests would prevail. They don't. Congressional decisions about airplanes, ships, and weapons systems are heavily influenced by parochial

political concerns about local jobs and subcontractors, and even the most liberal members sometimes find themselves demanding the continuation of unbelievably expensive programs—most recently, for the F-22 Raptor fighter—that the Pentagon has explicitly said *it does not want*.⁶²

Examples are pervasive and easy to come by, because they simply reflect business as usual in the halls of Congress. So here is the question. Why don't members of Congress *stop doing these things*? Why don't they forgo pork barrel politics, rise above the special interests, and do what's best for the nation? The answer is simply that they have strong *incentives* to do exactly what they are doing. These incentives, moreover, are not a matter of choice. They are endogenous to the political system: they arise from the electoral and legislative institutions that members of Congress are part of and that determine their careers, their professional lives, and their ultimate success in office. Above all else, if these members want to get reelected—and, of course, they do—then they need to bring home the bacon to their districts and states, and they need to attract support from powerful, well-heeled interest groups.⁶³

None of this has much to do with who they are as human beings. *Any* human being who wants to be a member of Congress—and wants to stay there—needs to play the game. That is to say, they need to respond wisely and efficiently to the incentives of their institutions. If they don't, they won't succeed. Congress is made up of 535 very different human beings, each with his or her own personality, family, moral values, past experiences, and all sorts of other distinctive baggage that shape how they think and feel. But these human qualities are *not* the keys to understanding how they behave as members of Congress. In that *one* role—but not in the rest of their lives—their behavior is highly structured by their institutional incentives. And that is how we understand what they do. We focus on their incentives, and on the institutions that give rise to those incentives.

This way of thinking is characteristic of institutionalism, and it is fundamental to how political scientists approach Congress—and the bureaucracy, the presidency, and all other political institutions. They don't do it for ideological reasons. They don't do it because they have an ax to grind or a favorite conclusion to embrace. They do it because it allows them to avoid getting buried in needless distractions and to lay bare the essence of what they are trying to understand.

The teachers unions can usefully be approached in exactly the same way. Like members of Congress, union leaders are elected to their organizational roles, and in those roles—but not in the rest of their lives—they have strong incentives to behave in very distinctive ways. Above all else, they must be centrally concerned with pleasing their members—their constituents—who are employees of the public school system, and who fully expect their unions to protect their jobs, to get them higher wages and better benefits, to push for teacher-friendly work rules, to oppose threatening changes, and in general, to fight for their basic

job-related interests. As is true for members of Congress, moreover, the incentives for union leaders are not matters of choice. They arise from the organizational foundations of the unions themselves—their basic need to survive, their reliance on member solidarity, the ability of members to toss out ineffective leaders—and ensure that all union leaders will tend to approach their jobs in the same basic way: they will be special interest advocates for their members.⁶⁴

This is not to say that union leaders, as human beings, are “self-interested.” Although their qualities surely vary, they may care very deeply about children and want the best for them. They may also be very concerned about the quality of education and be convinced that significant improvement in the public schools is called for. More generally, they may be very good, public-spirited people. But these qualities are not of the essence when it comes to what they *do* in their jobs. As leaders, for reasons that are intricately woven into the warp and woof of their organizations, they have compelling incentives to represent the occupational interests of their members—and these special interests may require that they sometimes do things that are *not* in the best interests of children, quality education, or effective schools.

Recall from our tour of the Rubber Rooms what the New York City principal had to say about the leader of the local teachers union: “Randi Weingarten would defend a dead body in the classroom. That’s her job.” What he’s saying is that Weingarten uses the union’s resources to protect the jobs of bad teachers and keep them in the classroom. But he is also saying *why* she does it: she does it because *it is her job*. This is precisely my point. The fact that Randi Weingarten fights to protect the jobs of bad teachers does *not* mean that, as a human being, she doesn’t care about kids. Nor does it mean she doesn’t care about quality education or effective schools. It means she is responding to the incentives of her job and doing what anyone in that role would do—by acting as a special interest advocate for her members.

In the grander scheme of things, it should hardly come as a surprise that union leaders are special interest advocates and that the teachers unions are special interest organizations. The same is true of all unions. And in the private sector, the unions themselves are quite transparent about it. What’s to hide? The United Auto Workers pushes hard to secure good wages and benefits for employees on the auto assembly lines, and it doesn’t pretend to be concerned, first and foremost, with the welfare of the millions of consumers who buy cars. The Retail Clerks Union is concerned about the wages, benefits, and job protections of supermarket cashiers, not about the welfare of the consumers who buy food.⁶⁵ Unions are special interest advocates. They know it, and everybody knows it.

The teachers unions, however, are in the public sector. And in the public sector the rules of the game are different than in the private sector. The unions still have incentives to be special interest advocates for their members. But as

organizations of employees who work for government, they are heavily dependent on the political process and thus on gaining democratic support for what they do and want. So to behave wisely in this institutional setting, they have incentives to convince the voting public that they are *not* self-interested, but in fact are fundamentally concerned about children and quality education—and that whatever they do to promote their own interests is actually good for children and schools too.

In the realm of politics, this camouflaging of special interests is quite normal. The teachers unions have incentives to do it. But so do all political interest groups, whether their interests are in guns or pharmaceuticals or telecommunications or agriculture. The drill is a familiar one: they all claim that the policies they favor are in the public interest, and they all routinely provide arguments (backed by cherry-picked evidence) about how ordinary Americans will be better off as a result. This is simply how the game of politics is played. The reality is that these arguments often have little or no bearing on why they take the policy positions they do. They *know* where they stand from the outset, because their stands are dictated by their *interests*. The arguments they make are simply tools for achieving those interests, and are chosen to try to convince *other* people to take the same stands. By and large, they often say anything that works. So as any sophisticated observer knows, it is best not to take what interest group leaders say at face value. To understand politics, we need to focus on what these groups *do*. And the way to explain what they do is to pay close attention to their interests.⁶⁶

All of this applies across the board to the teachers unions. When they argue, for example, that charter schools should be opposed because of their poor academic performance, they may or may not be saying something accurate about the actual performance of charter schools. The more important fact is that this is not why they oppose charter schools in the first place. They oppose them because charters give kids alternatives to the regular public schools—allowing them to leave and threatening the jobs of unionized teachers. In the democratic arena, it obviously wouldn't go over well for them to simply say that. So their challenge, for this educational issue and all others, is to look around for arguments—any arguments—that might convince voters and potential allies to support their predetermined position. The themes, accordingly, are all about what's good for children and schools. Their special interests are carefully hidden inside a public interest package. That's how the game is played.

Again, this is entirely normal. The teachers unions are just doing what all political interest groups do. In one important respect, however, they have a big advantage over most other interest groups in being able to hide their special interests. The advantage is that their members are teachers, and Americans *like* teachers. They admire them, they trust them, they often interact with them personally, and they see them as caring about children and quality education.⁶⁷ The

unions are well aware of this, and their political strategy, packaged with the help of public relations experts, is designed to put a human face—a teacher’s face—on union behavior. Their strategy is to *personalize* it. They spend millions of dollars on media ads for and against political candidates and specific education policies; to listen to these ads, you would never know that a union is involved. The ads are about the *teachers* that Americans so trust and about the candidates and issues these *teachers* support—for the good of children and the public schools.⁶⁸

Politics can be confusing. In part, this is because it’s complicated. But it’s also because many of the key players actually have incentives to confuse us—to camouflage the driving role of their own special interests—and they’re very good at what they do. It’s their job. This is where institutionalism is especially valuable, as it helps us keep our eye on the ball: by homing in on their incentives, the sources of those incentives, and the consequences for behavior. When we do that, we can see that what these players *say* is often very different from what they *do*, that appearances aren’t always what they seem—and we are much better able to understand what is actually happening.

So let’s readdress the question at hand. What role should we expect the teachers unions to play within American education? We now have a foundation for thinking about this issue, and here is a simple summary of the basics.

—The teachers unions are special interest groups.

—As the most powerful groups in American education, they *use* their power to promote these special interests—in collective bargaining, in politics—and this often leads them to do things that are not good for children or for schools.

—None of this has anything to do with union leaders or teachers being self-interested as human beings. The unions can be—and are—special interest groups, even though leaders and teachers may well care very much about children, quality education, and effective schools.

The same institutional logic applies to legislators and other public officials at all levels of government. Whatever their human values and beliefs may be in the greater scope of their lives, they have strong incentives in their institutional roles—if they want to stay in office and succeed—to be receptive to powerful interest groups. In the realm of public education, this means that politicians—especially Democrats, given the nature of their alliances—have incentives to be responsive to the very real power of the teachers unions, and thus to their special interests. This is another way of saying that, even if the Democrats are genuinely concerned about helping disadvantaged kids and improving urban schools, their incentives may often lead them to take actions that are not in the best interests of these kids and are not well designed to improve their schools. The problem isn’t that these politicians are somehow bad people or self-interested. It is that they cannot escape their institutional incentives, and need to cater to the unions (at least some of the time) if they are to survive and prosper in their jobs.

Taken together, these elements make it unavoidable that public education is an arena of special interest power. When public officials make their decisions about the public schools, whether those decisions have to do with funding or personnel rules or new programs or major reforms, we cannot blithely assume that they are doing what is best for children and seeking out the most effective possible solutions. In fact, they are often responding to special interest groups. And the most powerful of these groups, by far, are the teachers unions.

To recognize as much is not to single out the education system for special criticism. No one who is familiar with American politics outside of public education should be at all surprised at what is happening inside of it, because, in their essential features, they are basically the same. Throughout American politics, in virtually every area of public policy, the norm is that special interest groups are active and influential. Politicians of both parties, meanwhile, are often open and receptive to interest group influence, because they have a lot to gain from what these groups have to offer and strong incentives to attract their support. To say that education is an arena of special interest influence, then, is simply to say that it is normal. It is like every other policy arena.⁶⁹

Look at the nation's experience with health care legislation in 2009–10. Here was another noble idea that, in the policy process, turned into a train wreck with countless special interest groups struggling to shape the outcome. Insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, doctors, labor unions, trial attorneys—the list of powerful groups goes on and on, each with its own special angle and real power to wield. And members of Congress? They were quite responsive. The insurance companies defeated the “public option,” which would have allowed the government to offer competing insurance policies. The pharmaceutical companies prevented Americans from gaining the right to buy prescription drugs from Canada. The trial attorneys headed off tort reforms that would have limited the malpractice liabilities (and crushing insurance premiums) of doctors. One special interest victory after another. The result was a piece of legislation that no one could really be proud of, and that never seriously tackled the critical challenge of reducing health care costs.⁷⁰

Welcome to American government. Clearly, it would be impossible to understand this nation's attempt at health care reform without recognizing the extensive involvement and influence of special interest groups. The same is true for the struggles and events in any other area of public policy, including education. If education is at all different, it is because, unlike most areas of policy, *one* special interest is far more powerful than any others. By focusing on that one special interest, then, and by learning about the various roles it plays in shaping the public schools and the policies that govern them, we should be able to learn a great deal about the American education system —and why its serious problems have yet to be overcome despite a quarter century of national effort.

So that's the plan. And from an objective standpoint, as someone who has been teaching about and researching American political institutions for longer than I care to admit, it is a plan that strikes me as so straightforward that it borders on the obvious. With the teachers unions so clearly powerful in public education, there is *no excuse* for not studying them. How can we expect to understand the public schools—and the nation's deeply rooted education problems—if the teachers unions are routinely ignored? Yet, for decades, that is essentially what has happened. Education researchers have done next to nothing to make them a focus of serious, sustained inquiry.

This book is an attempt to change that. I don't claim to be writing a definitive work on the subject. And I don't claim to be omniscient. But I do hope to shed some useful light on the teachers unions, and on the education system as a whole. And I hope that other researchers, whether they agree with the specifics of this book or not, will soon bring the unions to center stage as important subjects for study.