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Educationalizing the Welfare State and Privatizing Education: The Evolution of Social Policy Since the New Deal

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THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL POLICY SINCE THE NEW DEAL

Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe

BELIEF IN THE capacity of public education to redress unequal opportunity and eliminate poverty is one of the most distinctive features of American social policy. It is especially evident in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which has invoked an equality-of-results test of public school performance that neglects conditions inside and outside the schools that contribute to inequality. But belief in the efficacy of education to protect against the risks and uncertainties of the free market is hardly a new development in federal policy. For a half century, ever since Lyndon Johnson prioritized education over the project of building on the New Deal to create a robust welfare state, educational reform has been the federal government's favored solution to problems of poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity.

This faith in the power of education historically has justified greater access to schooling for low-income children as well as the investment of additional resources in the schools that serve them. But the idea that inequality and poverty are susceptible to educational correction has also had several less desirable consequences. It has not only reduced pressure on the state for other social policies that might more directly ameliorate economic distress; because education's capacity to redistribute opportunity has been limited by the absence of social policies that directly address poverty and economic inequality, it has also fueled disillusionment with public education itself for its failure to solve problems that are beyond its reach. In the current social and political context, this disillusion has generated support for

market-oriented and business-based forms of education and social provision that threaten to deepen inequality rather than reduce it.¹ In this chapter, we examine the intensification of policy making around these strategies of educational reform by situating it within the history of education and social policy from the New Deal to the era of No Child Left Behind.²

FROM THE NEW DEAL TO THE GREAT SOCIETY

We begin with the New Deal because it institutionalized for the first time in the nation's history the idea that the federal government was responsible for ensuring the economic security and welfare of its citizens.³ Education, however, played only an incidental role in the federal government's efforts to address these problems. Although President Franklin Roosevelt had no interest in providing federal financial assistance for public education, his New Deal spawned several education-related programs to respond to the ravages of the Depression. Most notably, the Civil Works Administration, predecessor to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), built and repaired a significant number of school buildings and hired thousands of unemployed teachers; the National Youth Administration offered work-study programs to high school and college students; the Civilian Conservation Corps provided some schooling to the young men it hired to do conservation work; and, more innovatively, the Federal Art Project and Federal Theater Project promoted cultural education. None of these was intended primarily as an educational project, however. In keeping with the New Deal's emphasis on economic relief and recovery, their chief purposes were either to provide jobs and income to the unemployed or to reduce the competition for jobs by keeping young people out of the labor market. When World War II increased the demand for labor, political support for New Deal work relief programs evaporated, and Congress abolished all of them before the war ended.⁴

Although the New Deal did not institutionalize public job creation, other New Deal programs intended to provide a measure of economic security and protection against the uncertainties of the market had staying power. These included a minimum wage, unemployment insurance, retirement benefits, federal support for public assistance, and the right of workers to organize. For a moment in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it appeared that a social democratic agenda might extend these benefits to the point where the federal government's responsibility for its citizens' economic and social welfare would approach the provisions of the welfare states being erected in northern and western Europe. These postwar social democratic governments in Europe sought to reduce unemployment and economic

deprivation by institutionalizing labor and income policies to guarantee a minimum standard of living. By the 1960s, however, this robust view of economic and social provision in America would be replaced by a focus on education. Instead of dealing with problems of social disadvantage and economic insecurity by expanding this nascent welfare state, President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society would seek to address these problems mainly through compensatory education and job training policies. These policies aimed not to protect the least advantaged from the inequities and uncertainties of the labor market, but rather to develop individuals' human capital so that they might participate in it.⁵

This evolution in social policy was propelled by several factors: Johnson's personal belief in the power of education; the way policymakers had come to think about the causes of poverty and economic disadvantage, especially their commitment to the idea of a culture of poverty; and strategic political attempts to distance the liberal agenda from anything resembling collectivism during the Cold War.⁶ But the broadest context for this change was set by two other postwar developments. One was the containment of organized labor's social democratic agenda within collective bargaining agreements.⁷ The other was the NAACP's decision to prioritize school desegregation efforts in its attack on racial inequality.⁸ Private negotiations between workers and employers over wages and fringe benefits, together with African American demands for school desegregation, reduced political pressure on the state for public job creation, income redistribution, and other social benefits. Instead, social policy making was reoriented around educational reform.⁹

The Great Society's focus on education certainly did not exclude other forms of public social provision. It created Medicare and Medicaid and devoted some resources to food stamps. In addition, the need to staff other social programs expanded employment opportunities for African Americans, Latinos, and the poor. For the most part, however, the Great Society did not expand on the steps the New Deal had taken toward building a floor under incomes and providing public jobs for the poor. Absent a broad-based constituency in favor of a more expansive welfare state, it turned instead to less intrusive, more politically palatable proposals. These included tax cuts to stimulate economic growth, educational initiatives, and job-training programs designed to help those on the margins without antagonizing business by interfering directly in the labor market or without alienating White middle- and working-class voters by transferring income to African Americans and the poor. Johnson continually referred to this strategy as a "hand-up not a hand-out."¹⁰

Ironically, it was Richard Nixon who contemplated offering an expanded system of social benefits. For a time, he supported a strategy of direct payments to

individuals, such as increasing spending on food stamps, indexing Social Security payments to inflation, and creating a federal income guarantee for the aged, blind, and disabled poor (Supplemental Security Income, or SSI). At the same time Nixon supported income security, he simultaneously tried to limit the growth of federal spending on education and other Great Society programs such as the Job Corps and Community Action. In the end, however, Nixon was neither deeply committed to universalizing the federal government's responsibility for income security, nor was he successful in limiting the federal commitment to education. Criticized by liberals who thought he set benefit levels too low and by conservatives who were opposed to extending "welfare" to employed workers, he gave up on a proposal for a guaranteed annual income (the Family Assistance Plan) and, under pressure from "pro-family" conservatives, vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have provided federal funding for child care.¹¹ At the same time, a bipartisan coalition in Congress thwarted his effort to limit the federal commitment to education, which resulted in increased federal spending for the Great Society's education programs.¹²

Nixon's retreat did not preclude other efforts to institutionalize more expansive protections against economic risk. Jimmy Carter liberalized eligibility for food stamps and expanded the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), first passed in 1973, which provided public service jobs to the unemployed. He also tried to put a guaranteed annual income measure (Program for Better Jobs and Income) back on the social policy agenda. But, committed to budgetary restraint, he only pushed halfheartedly for it; and by the end of his term, he had come to believe that combating inflation and reducing the federal budget deficit required a reduction in expenditures for CETA and other social welfare programs.¹³ Instead, he sought to raise the visibility of education in the federal bureaucracy by advocating and winning congressional approval for a cabinet-level Department of Education.¹⁴ As a result, Carter wound up reinforcing the central place education had come to occupy in the nation's system of social provision while setting in motion the antigovernment rhetoric, particularly the idea that excessive government spending on social welfare was the chief cause of the nation's economic problems, that has been the central theme in debates about social policy ever since Ronald Reagan's election.¹⁵

RACE AND THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION IN THE GREAT SOCIETY

Although the Great Society embraced a more restricted conception of the benefits the state can provide than did the New Deal, it was much more racially inclusive.

In its efforts to alleviate distress and provide for the needy, the New Deal had certainly included African Americans and Latinos. With some notable exceptions, however (such as the program to fund Black graduate students set up by Mary MacLeod Bethune in the National Youth Administration and the modest affirmative action program that Harold Ickes initiated within the short-lived Public Works Administration), New Deal agencies took no action to counter racial discrimination. Minimum wage and maximum hour legislation, old-age benefits, and unemployment insurance excluded agricultural and domestic workers, who were disproportionately African American and Latino; the right to bargain collectively did little for those African American and Latino workers whom unions excluded from membership and, through the closed shop, from factory jobs altogether; and the Federal Housing Administration discriminated against African American and Latino home buyers by restricting federal mortgage guarantees to white neighborhoods. In sum, while the New Deal did not exclude African Americans and Latinos, its programs, as well as the passage of the GI Bill in 1944, rested rather easily with white supremacy and played a major role in both intensifying residential segregation and creating the racial disparities in wealth that continue to shape educational inequality today.¹⁶

In contrast to the New Deal, the Great Society sought to address racial discrimination. Although this concern for racial equality embraced Latinos and Native Americans, the main catalyst for it was the need to address the demands of African Americans.¹⁷ In responding to pressure from the civil rights movement, Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Together, these measures sought to “undo the racial legacy of the New Deal” and to integrate African Americans into the welfare state by outlawing segregation in public accommodations, affirming African American voting rights, prohibiting the distribution of federal funds to racially segregated institutions, and extending civil rights protections to the labor and housing markets.¹⁸ This legislation also empowered the federal government to intervene in states and localities to guarantee these rights, though the strong enforcement provisions that African Americans and many White liberals desired were typically watered down before final passage, especially in employment and housing.

The centerpiece of Great Society education legislation, Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), promised to help African Americans by providing much-needed financial aid to schools that served low-income students, particularly in the South and in big cities. Title I, however, was not responsive to Black demands, which in the early 1960s focused mainly on school desegregation. Title I, in fact, was quite compatible with the persistence of racially segregated institutions. For this reason, the NAACP, other civil

rights groups, and a few White liberals denied that the program was a meaningful response to the problem of racial inequality in the schools.¹⁹

It is not clear whether this preference for compensation rather than desegregation was intentional. Certainly, Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel and his successor, Harold Howe, believed that the passage of Title I would provide southern school districts with an incentive to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited the distribution of federal funds to segregated schools.²⁰ But that is not how things turned out. Although most observers credit the threat of fund deferrals for pushing southern school systems from intransigent defiance to token acceptance of school desegregation, linking the implementation of Title I to the enforcement of Title VI produced a backlash in Congress that threatened the very survival of Title I and other Great Society education programs.²¹ Consequently, President Johnson pressured Health, Education and Welfare officials to weaken the program's ties to federal desegregation efforts as the price the administration had to pay to ensure its continuation.

This trade-off did not eliminate subsequent conflicts over the connection between Title I and desegregation. In the early 1970s, the reauthorization of Title I became entangled with Nixon's efforts to win congressional approval for legal restrictions on school busing. Because of opposition from liberals in Congress, the most restrictive features of anti-busing measures that sought to limit court action failed. But when Congress reauthorized Title I in 1974, it not only limited the federal government's power to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act but also prohibited the use of federal funds for busing. By then, even many who once considered themselves advocates of civil rights, particularly northern liberals who represented urban districts and were under pressure from their White constituents to oppose court-ordered busing, had begun to think of Title I as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, federal desegregation efforts.²²

RACE, THE LIMITS OF REDISTRIBUTION, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Although educational reform appealed to policy makers because it appeared to be a politically palatable alternative to more direct forms of intervention in the labor market and because it was less expensive than a more expansive system of publicly funded social provision, the Great Society's strategy of relying on the provision of additional educational resources to low-income and minority children turned out to face its own obstacles. Since Title I posed no threat to segregated institutions and built new networks of professional, political, and financial interests

committed to its survival, it turned out to be remarkably resilient. But because of poor implementation, insufficient funding, and the way available funds were disbursed, it never operated as more than a “modest supplement to very unequally distributed state and local educational resources.”²³ Consequently, it did much less to improve educational outcomes for low-income students than its proponents initially hoped it would.²⁴

School desegregation was a more robust method of redistribution. In contrast to Title I, which did not disturb power relations between the races, it sought to root out racial inequality by providing African American students with access to the superior resources of the schools White students attended. In doing so, however, it threatened white exclusivity, inspired massive White resistance, and proceeded at a glacial pace until the Supreme Court acted in the late 1960s to strike down freedom-of-choice plans that had failed to produce more than token desegregation. The court subsequently legitimated the use of school busing and began to require remedies for racially segregated schools in the North and West as well as the South. Though these actions were compromised by the unequal burden of busing, school closures, and teacher layoffs imposed on African American students and communities, and by the persistence of discriminatory practices within desegregated schools, they marked a sharp departure from Jim Crow schooling; opened up access to greater educational resources for African American students, especially for African Americans in the rural South; and helped accelerate Black educational progress.²⁵

But this more assertive stance was short-lived. As the Black Freedom Movement challenged the distinction between de jure and de facto segregation that had limited desegregation to the cities and protected suburban housing markets and school districts from court-ordered integration, the already tenuous political support for more affirmative policies evaporated, and further action was rejected by officials in all three branches of government. Anxious to cultivate political support among White, middle-class suburbanites opposed to metropolitan remedies, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan all reaffirmed the de jure/de facto distinction and opposed busing across school district lines. So did bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress, and, most importantly, a majority of justices on the Supreme Court. Transformed by the appointment of four Nixon nominees, the Supreme Court moved in 1973 to protect the financial advantages of property-rich suburban districts (*San Antonio v. Rodriguez*), and a year later it began a long retreat from its insistence that districts in violation of *Brown v. Board of Education* take aggressive action to overcome segregation when it reversed a lower court that had challenged the “housing/education nexus” and mandated urban-suburban desegregation in Detroit (*Milliken v. Bradley*). Subsequent school desegregation plans

focused on voluntary urban-suburban transfers and magnet programs designed to hold White students in city school systems or attract them from the suburbs. Because they left intact the fusion of residential segregation and suburban political autonomy, however, they did not do much to alter the racial composition of most urban or suburban schools.²⁶

The accumulated experience of Title I and desegregation ultimately eroded the intellectual credibility of the former and the political credibility of the latter. Although both programs continued to have steadfast advocates both inside and outside Congress, by the early 1980s the logic that had motivated and sustained these policies had vanished, and few policy makers saw them as viable approaches to the redistribution of educational or economic opportunity.²⁷ By institutionalizing the idea that poverty and income insecurity were chiefly matters of education, however, the Great Society actually increased expectations about what education could accomplish. As a result, the federal commitment to education and its role in social policy remained firmly in place despite the backlash against the Great Society's own educational programs.²⁸

While the Great Society's commitment to federal policy making in education had won widespread support, even among many conservatives, disillusionment with its educational initiatives precluded further expansion of compensatory or redistributionist strategies of reform. In the 1970s, Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act provided the rationale for the extension of civil rights protections to English language learners and disabled children, and Title I of ESEA remained the programmatic foundation on which future federal education policies would be built. But by the 1980s, federal policy no longer embodied the idea that the government should intervene to alter the arrangements that resulted in the segregation of African American and Latino students in underperforming schools or to compensate them for their unequal access to educational resources. Federal policy focused instead on trying to improve their educational outcomes without disturbing the advantages of the wealthiest schools and their predominantly White, middle-class clientele.

FROM THE GREAT SOCIETY TO THE ENABLING STATE

Between 1970 and 2000 the programmatic legacy of the New Deal/Great Society welfare state and the ideological consensus that sustained it was challenged by the popularization of a different conception of the role of the state in social policy. In contrast to the New Deal, which sought to build a minimal floor under incomes, and the Great Society, which sought to extend opportunity through the expansion

of social services such as education and job training, this new view of the state's role in social policy proposed to limit the federal government's responsibility for income security and to restructure the system of social provision by minimizing direct redistributive measures in favor of more market-oriented forms of social protection.²⁹

Nothing in this transformation altered the trajectory set in motion during the 1960s that placed educational reform at the center of social policy making. To the contrary, as political support for more expansive forms of publicly provided social provision eroded, belief in what education might accomplish actually became stronger, and policy making around education intensified. In fact, despite the widespread disillusionment with Great Society liberalism that became evident in the early 1970s and accelerated over the next three decades, when we view the years since 1980 through the prism of educational policy, we see a reassertion of the preference to offer protection to citizens against the uncertainties of the market by reformulating the problems of poverty, inequality, and income insecurity in terms of economic growth and educational achievement.

Our argument here is partially at odds with current thinking about the history of education and the welfare state that views the emphasis on educational policy since 1980 as symbolic of a shift away from the "social insurance type welfare state" inherited from the New Deal toward what Neil Gilbert and Barbara Gilbert have called an "enabling state."³⁰ The decades since 1980, in fact, have more in common with the past than it appears at first glance once we recognize that the chief characteristic of the system of social provision that evolved in the 1960s was not so much its efforts to expand the social insurance and welfare policies inherited from the New Deal as its reliance on education as an alternative to more interventionist policies to reduce poverty and economic distress and promote job security, employment, and economic opportunity.

What has distinguished the last thirty years is not the reliance on "enabling" measures but the broader shift in the ideological context of social policy. Though the Great Society turned to education as an alternative to direct public expenditures on social provision or assertive interventions in the labor market, it did not seek to reduce the income supports put in place during the New Deal or to dismantle the system of employment-based benefits it inherited. Rather, the Great Society sought to incorporate the poor and people of color into this system by promoting economic growth and by equalizing the conditions of educational provision. By contrast, the dominant trend in social policy after 1980 has been to minimize dependence on the state by placing responsibility for coping with economic risk on individuals and families, while relying more heavily on education to promote self-reliance, individual responsibility, and labor market participation.

Thus we have been witnessing the apparent paradox of even more intensive federal intervention in education coupled with efforts to minimize federal responsibility for other forms of social and economic provision.³¹

This shift in policy can be attributed in part to the effects of globalization and deindustrialization, most importantly the post-1973 slowdown in industrial productivity and economic growth, which put pressure on the federal budget.³² But the diminution of the federal commitment to forms of social provision other than education was hardly an inevitable response to the effects of economic change on the federal budget. What tipped the balance were changes in the ways different groups and classes viewed the government's relationship to the market and its role in social provision and their relative power to influence politics and governmental policy making.

Among these changes, much scholarly attention has focused on the escalating backlash from blue-collar workers and middle-income suburbanites who, worried about urban decline and rising tax rates, rebelled against social policies they believed catered to the needs of people of color and the poor at their expense.³³ More important, however, was the political mobilization of business leaders. Faced with declining profits and an increasingly competitive international economic environment, they turned their backs on the employment-based system of public/private provision they had helped to construct after World War II. Instead, they proposed to "infuse a capitalist ethos" into the politics of social provision and financed the creation of an unprecedented number of new business associations, think tanks, foundations, and lobbying organizations to develop an intellectual rationale for applying market-oriented principles to social policy and to elect political leaders who supported those principles.³⁴

Social Security and Medicare, which served the elderly and benefited a broad working- and middle-class constituency, persisted despite these pressures. So did SSI which served those whom policy makers considered to be the "deserving poor." But absent an "effective political counterweight"³⁵ willing or able to challenge the logic of the market and the legitimacy of large corporations, the effect of this business mobilization and the proliferation of conservative and free-market think tanks it sponsored was to shift the terrain of debate in favor of the idea that public social provision could not ameliorate the problems it was intended to solve but in fact had made them worse by discouraging work, encouraging dependence on the state, and interfering with economic growth. The result was social policy that sought to reduce direct public provision in favor of programs, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which limited access to welfare and encouraged work and educational reforms that aimed to prepare children from poor families to participate more successfully in

the labor market so that they could deal with economic risk through their own efforts.³⁶

This reorientation did not go uncontested. Concerned about deteriorating wages and growing income inequality, in the 1980s a few liberal Democrats led by Representative George Miller, Senator Ted Kennedy, and members of the Congressional Black Caucus supported greater funding for education programs in association with policies for full employment, health care, housing, and a minimum standard of living.³⁷ However, after the failure of Carter's proposal for a guaranteed income in 1978 and the termination of CETA in 1982, neither Republicans nor Democrats sought to combine education policy with a thoroughgoing system of income support, family allowances, or public employment. They turned instead to an expansion of education policy as a way to minimize the demand for more robust public policies to alleviate economic insecurity. Republicans, with support from many moderate Democrats, pushed a combination of tax and deficit reduction policies that constrained the government's capacity to fund other forms of social provision.³⁸

THE REINVENTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL STATE

Based on the conviction that the expansion of educational policy making would foster and help legitimate the reorientation of the welfare state around a new social contract, which its supporters referred to as "public support for private responsibility," this movement extended the federal government's preference—first evidenced in the 1960s—for providing economic security through education. But this movement rejected the idea that the federal government should intervene to address the effects of economic disadvantage and racial segregation. Hostile to redistributionist strategies of reform, it sought instead to remodel the education system in accordance with the same principles that were restructuring the rest of the welfare state. The result has been a reorientation of education policy around market-based and business-derived models of organization that heightened expectations for education but left intact inequities between schools with wealthier students and those with large numbers of low-income and students of color.

Led by a coalition of business and political elites,³⁹ this movement coalesced in the 1990s around two forms of state action, one based on public financing for privately provided educational services (e.g., vouchers and other forms of privatization) and the other based on a corporate model of organization that emphasized local responsibility in return for centralized regulation of specific, measured school outcomes. Different in orientation, these strategies nonetheless shared the

assumption that school failure had less to do with class- and race-based inequities in the conditions of educational provision than with the lack of accountability for how schools used the resources they had to educate their students.⁴⁰

Voucher experiments were instituted in some urban school systems, most notably Milwaukee and Cleveland, and a few states have adopted limited non-means-tested voucher plans and voucherlike tax credit policies.⁴¹ No state or school district, however, has yet fully embraced the idea of publicly financing private schooling where accountability is determined by a school's capacity to attract and retain voucher-bearing students. But much of this market-oriented idea has now been incorporated into public systems across the country in the form of charter schools and charter-school networks, which frequently contract with private companies to run the schools. Today there are over 5,000 charter schools in 40 states serving over 1.5 million students (see Scott and Wells, chapter 9, this volume).⁴² Because they technically remain public, charters have not satisfied the most ardent advocates of privatization and market-based reform. Yet by restructuring public systems around the principles of flexibility, competition, and choice, they have begun to transform long-standing conceptions of public responsibility in education, not only individualizing responsibility but also putting families in competition with one another for access to educational resources at the expense of more collective remedies intended to address the racial and economic arrangements on which public school systems have long been based.⁴³

Still more influential among federal policymakers has been the idea of accountability-based reform, which culminated the year after George W. Bush's election with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (hereafter, "NCLB") in 2001.⁴⁴ The most significant federal initiative since the passage of ESEA in 1965, NCLB codified the rejection of compensatory and redistributionist strategies of educational reform. Although it took incremental steps to concentrate more money in high-poverty schools, its main goal was to use federal policy to reorient public education around the principles of business organization on the assumption that the chief problem facing American education had less to do with the inequitable distribution of resources than with the bureaucratic arrangements that protected underperforming schools from the consequences of failure. To remedy this required states to set minimum proficiency standards for all students and to implement a prescribed set of sanctions against schools that failed to meet them, including access to public school choice, the provision of private supplementary educational services, and state-mandated restructuring of local schools.⁴⁵

A number of state and local school officials as well as advocates of states' rights in education opposed this strategy of reform.⁴⁶ But its emphasis on accountability

received support from several other groups. It was attractive, for example, to many suburban Whites who favored expanding educational opportunities for the least advantaged while preserving their own access to good schools. Yet, because it effectively shifted the blame for educational failure from the child to the school, it was also popular with some civil rights organizations, Black and Latino parents, and liberal advocacy groups. These organizations and groups believed that accountability offered a more robust sense of opportunity than Title I, which had been framed in a language of cultural deprivation that blamed poor children for their own educational failures. It also appeared at first glance to have been responsive to the view held by many African American educators that, contrary to what James Coleman, Christopher Jencks, and other sociologists seemed to imply,⁴⁷ schools do indeed matter, especially for low-income children and children of color, and that, in the post-civil rights era, racially and economically segregated schools and school systems can be organized to foster high achievement and promote greater economic opportunity.⁴⁸

Although NCLB appeared to many to have embraced a broader vision of equal opportunity than the policies that preceded it,⁴⁹ those hopes were soon dashed. While it rightly rejected the stigmatizing practices that had often accompanied the Great Society's compensatory programs and depressed the educational achievement of low-income children, NCLB, like Title I, more often functioned to reproduce educational inequality than reduce it. This time, however, the result was not due primarily to reformers' deficit assumptions about the intellectual capacities of African American, Latino, and low-income children. It was due rather to the fact that the application of NCLB's provisions to unequal schools typically wound up reinforcing class- and race-based differences in access to educational resources rather than increasing the resources available to those who lacked them.

Why and how this happened became apparent when researchers began studying the consequences of the NCLB's requirement that test scores be disaggregated by subgroup. This provision was included in NCLB at the insistence of liberals in Congress who believed that aggregated scores obscured differences in achievement between different groups of students. But because teachers and administrators in schools with large numbers of low-income students and students of color faced the historically insurmountable barrier of annually raising the test scores of multiple subgroups, including special education students, so that all of them attained the same level of proficiency, they sought to meet this goal by narrowing the curricula in their schools to focus on preparation for the requisite tests in reading and mathematics at the expense of other subjects.⁵⁰ At the same time, middle-class schools, which typically had fewer subgroups, made few changes in their regular practices but continued to offer a relatively enriched curriculum.⁵¹ In

this way, the disaggregation of test scores by subgroup, which was NCLB's most progressive feature, actually produced regressive results.

Theoretically, NCLB's provisions for choice, as well as the growth of charter schools, offered low-income students the opportunity to escape this predicament. But choice plans also encountered obstacles. Not only did the act's provisions for choice offer no incentives for high performing districts to accept students from lower-scoring urban schools, whom they feared would bring down their own school's test scores and thereby subject them to federal sanctions,⁵² but the lack of availability of a sufficient number of good public and charter schools in urban districts continued to limit the opportunities for low-income families to participate in the education marketplace.⁵³ As a result, more options typically did not translate into more opportunity.

EDUCATION, THE ENABLING STATE, AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Barack Obama has tried to alter the balance between public and private responsibility in economic and social policy, but he has not tried to substitute public for private authority in the market or alter the structure of the compromised welfare state he inherited. Rather, faced with the worst economic crisis in over half a century, he proposed and passed an economic recovery bill that focused on federal support for state governments and spending for privately contracted construction projects to relieve unemployment and encourage economic stabilization, much as Roosevelt's Public Works Administration did in the early days of the New Deal.⁵⁴ Similarly, his plan to expand access to health care relies on federal subsidies to universalize privately provided health insurance. That these measures have provoked so much opposition speaks more to how much the ideological reinvigoration of antistatism that began in the 1970s has intensified differences about what activities the federal government should carry out than it does to any dramatic expansion Obama proposed to the welfare state.

Despite some efforts to modify the direction of social policy, nowhere has Obama proposed to reduce the nation's reliance on education as its chief bulwark against poverty and economic insecurity or to alter the direction of the education policy he inherited. He not only continues to tout education as "the best antipoverty program" and the key to individual and national well-being,⁵⁵ but he also remains committed to reconstructing public education in accordance with market-oriented principles of motivation and business-based models of organization. In fact, though some of his supporters had hoped that he would reject these principles and models in favor of less competitive, more collectively oriented approaches,

his administration's main education initiatives—e.g., to make the receipt of Title I funds conditional on improvements in school performance, to accelerate the proliferation of charter schools, and to improve instruction by evaluating and paying teachers according to students' test scores—actually constitute an intensification of them. Consequently, his policies have reinforced the preference for educational solutions to the problem of social welfare at the same time that they have confined debates about educational policy to technical questions such as how to manage schools more efficiently, measure achievement more precisely, encourage teachers to work harder, and manipulate incentives to maximize choice. This narrowed discussion has largely ruled out more fundamental questions about race-based and economic disparities in educational opportunity.⁵⁶

While the recent intensification of policy making around education has made school reform a national priority, it actually has diminished the ability of public schools to equalize educational opportunity. By substituting education for direct forms of social provision, it has limited the federal government's capacity to address the poverty that destabilizes children's lives and erodes school achievement. At the same time, by substituting accountability for redistribution, it has further reduced the fiscal and curricular capacity of urban schools to produce the superior outcomes seen in the schools affluent students attend and deepened the sense that these schools do not merit additional public investment. A serious effort to equalize economic opportunity requires both a robust welfare state and schools with the ample resources and rich subject matter the well-to-do enjoy, free of tracking and the low expectations African American and Latino students often face (see Tyson, chapter 12, this volume).

Despite how far social policy has strayed from these goals, signs of dissatisfaction are emerging. Not only have conservative efforts to eliminate the last vestiges of the welfare state generated widespread opposition, but also the shortcomings of NCLB have begun to raise questions about the desirability of the choice and accountability agenda in education policy. Chastened by experience, even some of the most ardent advocates of choice and accountability have recently changed their minds about this policy agenda.⁵⁷ Whether this dissent will alter the future trajectory of social and educational policy is impossible to predict. But more than at any time during the past two decades, it provides a glimmer of possibility that we can redirect social and educational policy to restore a commitment to broadening public social provision and establishing conditions both outside and inside the schools that will reduce disparities in opportunity and engage students in serious intellectual work.