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ARE THERE ANY SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS?

American education history is filled with demands from on high for better student success that have solved little. The current surge of reading reforms will test whether top-down policymaking works.

BY ALAN J. BORSUK

In 2008, Margaret Spellings, then the U.S. Secretary of Education in the administration of President George W. Bush, visited Milwaukee. The visit included a meeting with the editorial board of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the city's daily newspaper. As an education reporter for the newspaper at the time, I was assigned to sit in and write about what she said.

It was more than six years after Congress, by large, bipartisan majorities, passed the sweeping education law called No Child Left Behind. The law required that every public school student in the country read and do math at grade level by 2014.

I asked Spellings whether a more realistic goal should be adopted since it was clear that getting 100 percent of kids to grade level was not going to happen in the next six years. How about something less ambitious but more doable?

Spellings disagreed. She said that every child could reach grade level and that she expected the law's requirement to be met. I told her that I was in favor of every student's succeeding but that I was willing to go with her right then to any of about 50 schools within a short distance of downtown Milwaukee, where it was very clear that fewer than 100 percent of the students were going to be reading on grade level six years out.

Of course, for a statement that gives me no satisfaction, in 2014 success fell *far* short of 100 percent nationwide. In fact, things hadn't changed much since 2008. Or since the law's passage in 2002. And they haven't improved much still today.

In many places, student achievement has slipped in recent years, perhaps largely on account of the impact of the COVID pandemic yet also because the gaps between higher-income students and lower-income students—precisely what the No Child Left Behind law was aimed at closing—have grown larger. A trip now to any of the schools I had in mind in 2008 would remain about as unhappy as it was then.

From coast to coast, the No Child Left Behind law remains one of the most important and telling examples of overreach by politicians: Proclaim big goals, create elaborate programs, make people involved in education jump through big hoops—and land on pretty much the same spot where things started.

The issue of overreach by government bodies, from presidents and the Congress to local school boards, in making decisions about schooling is a central fact of American education. Statutes, other laws, and prescriptive policies have been created for decades. But goals, even when

One theme of the work of the Law School's Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education is a focus on K–12 education law and policy. This section contains an essay (pp. 28–45) by Alan J. Borsuk, the Law School's senior fellow in law and public policy, interspersed with reactions by six individuals, including two colleagues from the Marquette University College of Education as well as national observers. The report concludes (pp. 46–51) with reportage by Sarah Carr concerning adult-literacy practice and policy in Wisconsin.

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Illustrations by Robert Neubecker

completely worthy, often have yielded in practice to realities that are complex and almost intractable. Many laws and policies have proven largely ineffective—some even outright failures.

This history, continuing up to the moment, raises important questions: In what ways can the law drive—or fail to drive—student success? For lawmakers at every level, who (rightfully) want to see students do better, what course should be pursued? What works? What would work better? Why do so many initiatives fail to yield the desired results?

The era of large-scale interaction between the world of policymakers and the world of students goes back about 70 years. As a broad generalization, before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, which held racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional, there was little role in education played by any branch of the federal government. State initiatives also were modest and less ambitious than now.

DESEGREGATION EFFORTS AND OTHER DISAPPOINTMENTS

Brown certainly had huge impacts. The phrase, "with all deliberate speed," that was used by the Supreme Court carried no timetable, and in many places it took years for large-scale action to unfold. But over a couple of decades, school desegregation plans were attempted all over the United States. In some ways, they broke the ideological mold that had supported segregated schools.

But did the results break segregation itself? There has been change in many places where communities themselves have become more diverse. But analyses of enrollment in schools continue to find that segregation remains a dominant fact, especially when it comes to the schools where millions of Black and Hispanic students are enrolled. (White students are overall more likely to attend schools where the diversity of students has increased.) In the overall picture, school segregation remains a fact of American life.

In the decades since *Brown v. Board*, top-down efforts intended to prod improved education outcomes, especially for children in groups where education success was historically weak, have been launched often.

The first version of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act was passed in 1965, when Lyndon B. Johnson was president (No Child Left Behind was one of the successor enactments). The first version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed in 1975, when Gerald R. Ford was president. Under Presidents Jimmy

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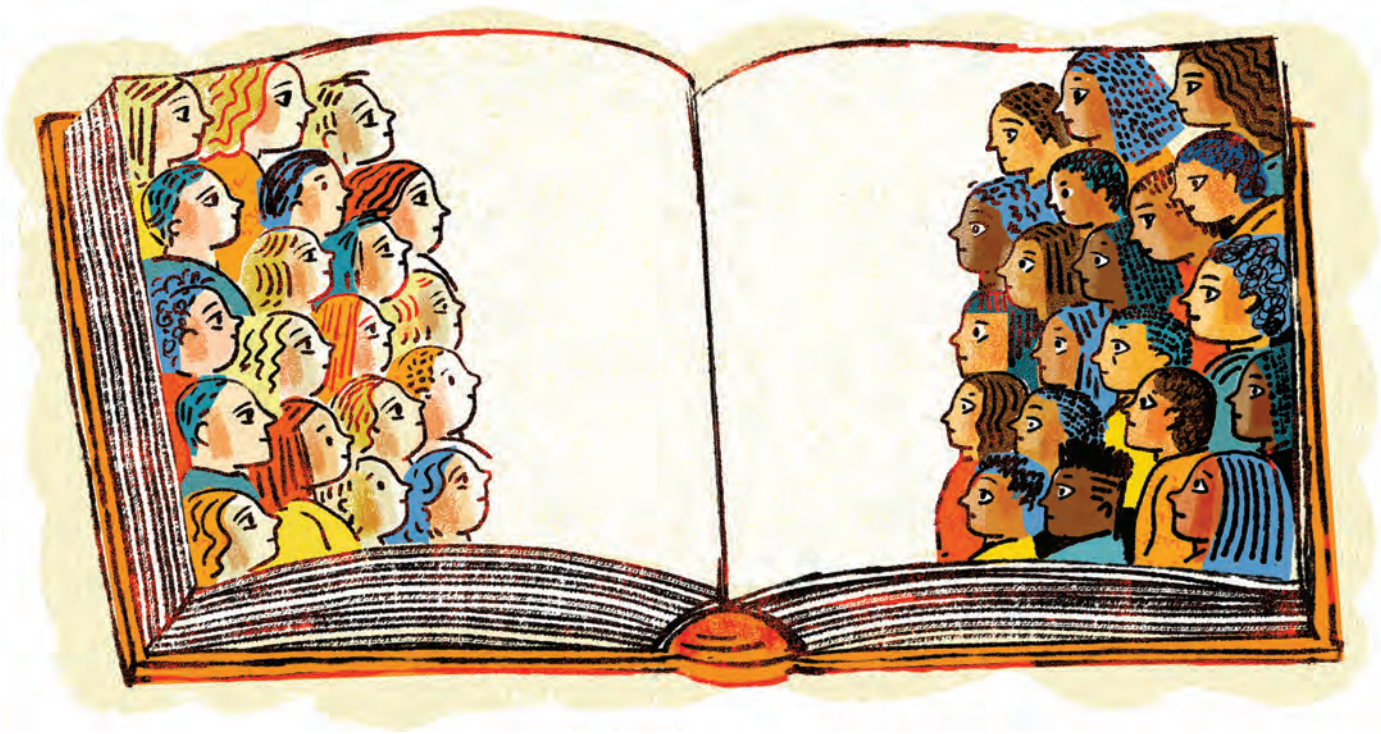

Millions of Students Suffer When Local Schools Are Left to Their Own Devices

BY THOMAS TOCH

Alan Borsuk has taken on the daunting task of judging decades of school reform in the United States. The vast majority of reform, he concludes, hasn't helped students, or the nation, very much. The core problem, Borsuk concludes, is that policymakers "from presidents . . . to local school boards" have "overreach[ed]," telling schools and the people in them what to do rather than leave educating to educators. But there's reason to view the arc of school reform from a different, more optimistic perspective.

Remember, half a century ago, public education was largely a black box. Policymakers and taxpayers had few ways to know whether students were learning or if their educational investments were paying off. Title IX hadn't transformed the educational landscape for women. Black and Latino students were largely excluded from the nation's education equation. And while the pandemic has been devastating to the nation's students and educators, a silver lining has emerged in the form of a nascent movement to bring high-quality tutoring—once the preserve of families who purchased it privately—into public schools.

Today, thanks to the bipartisan interventions of federal and state officials and many other people, public charter schools are providing high-quality education to millions of students. *Transparency* has become a watchword in education. While only half of white students and 25 percent of Black students earned high school diplomas in 1950, it's expected today that nearly every student be taught to high standards through high school. There's far more equity in education funding than in the past.

Importantly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the federal government's respected measure of student achievement, reported steady gains in reading and math from 1994 to 2012, the height of the national commitment to higher school standards. Gains were greatest among Black and Latino students.

Here's the reason why state and federal leaders became increasingly involved in school policy, why they became the engine of reform and reform became increasingly top-down: The leaders of the nation's 13,300 school districts and 100,000 schools largely failed to respond when tasked, in the wake of the civil rights movement and the changing nature of work, to do more for more students.

It's a function of the nation's decentralized public education governance system that 49 million public school students must depend on the inclinations of local school leadership. From the George H. W. Bush administration through the Barack Obama administration, successive Republican and Democratic presidents put increasing pressure on those local school leaders to raise student achievement through mandates for tougher standards, more testing, and greater accountability.

Are we where we want to be in public education? No. There was a tremendous amount of lost learning during the pandemic. Standards dropped. Student absenteeism spiked. College readiness declined. More broadly, education quality continues to be too closely correlated to students' skin color and parental income, and the bipartisanship that fueled reform for several decades has vanished, with Republicans now focused on diverting public money to private schooling and Democrats, beholden to teacher unions and other public education protectionists, offering little by way of school improvement strategies.

Of course, teachers, principals, and local administrators are key players in school improvement. If they aren't bought into reform strategies, the chances of success are greatly diminished, as was the case under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. But to expect reform to originate independently in thousands of local school districts (nearly half the nation's districts have fewer than 1,000 students) is more than unrealistic. As public education's past makes clear, millions of students suffer when local schools are left to their own devices.

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Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, there were major steps aimed at improving education. President Joe Biden's efforts to pass major education changes unleashed a large amount of money intended to offset COVID pandemic impacts but otherwise have largely been held back by the partisan gridlock in Congress. Executive orders by Biden have taken the place of congressional action in some cases.

And at the state level nationwide, recent decades have brought big ideas, big actions, big legislative disputes, and big judicial decisions.

A lot of what has been done by federal or state action is important. It has helped shape the education landscape nationwide. Decisions on funding of education, from Congress to school boards, are central to the viability and capacity of schools. Major changes in laws regarding students who have special education needs have enabled millions of children to get more services than they would have received in the past. The rise of "school choice"—including mechanisms for using public money to support children attending private schools and the creation of charter schools that are self-governed in important ways—has opened doors for large numbers of students to go to a much wider range of schools. A new era of opportunity for young women to take part in sports resulted from federal law. And policies and practices involving race, ethnicity, and gender identity have changed greatly, largely as the result of both changing public opinion and changing laws.

But has the rise of any or all of the grand initiatives solved the problems they were intended to address? Have gaps shrunk, have those who were dealt less promising circumstances at birth done any better overall, or have broadscale measures aimed at improving student academic skills, success, and proficiency paid off?

Well, at the risk of being too blunt about it: No.

Let's focus on one past and one current example of major policy initiatives aimed at raising the overall success of students from coast to coast: the No Child Left Behind era of 2002 to 2015, for the one, and, for the other, the surge of laws and state policies in the last several years aimed at making a lot more children proficient readers (more than 30 states have ordered changes in how literacy is taught).

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The principal federal law about kindergarten through 12th grade goes back to 1965. It was renewed several times over the following 36 years, each time with new provisions intended to spur positive change. Each time, that didn't happen, at least not on a large scale.

"A Nation at Risk," a landmark report issued by a national commission in 1983, decried declining success by students nationwide in literacy and math. The report said, "[T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. . . . [¶] If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." The report attracted much attention—but not big change.

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush summoned the nation's governors to a meeting on education in Charlottesville, at the University of Virgina, and 49 of the 50 governors attended. Among the goals that emerged—indeed, no. 1: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." Didn't happen.

In 2001, in the first year of President George W. Bush's administration, Bush and congressional leaders from both parties agreed that more demanding, ambitious, and specific goals and

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Successful Reform Requires Improving Teachers' Classroom Practice

BY ROBERT PONDISCIO

Alan Borsuk's important essay dives deeply into the complexities and challenges of education reform, raising important questions about decades of education policymaking. This topic—how classroom instruction can be improved through policy—resonates deeply with me. I have long been deeply sympathetic to the education-reform impulse, while tending to view with some skepticism its underlying assumptions and remedies. Teaching and learning mostly occur in publicly funded schools and within a policy context. But it doesn't follow that policymaking is the most effective lever to improve student outcomes. To be truly successful, education reform must transition from a policy-centric movement to one firmly grounded in making changes in classroom practice.

It is hard not to agree with Borsuk's observation that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was "one of the most important and telling examples of overreach by politicians," requiring by law that every child in the United States read and do math on grade level within 12 years of its passage. But it is important to learn the right lessons from such wild and even cartoonish policy initiatives. Broadly speaking, the education-reform policy playbook has operated for decades, at least tacitly, on the assumption that schools and teachers understand effective practice and are capable of delivering it—they just need to be properly incentivized and "held accountable." This is not only naive but cynical. It suggests that our classrooms are staffed by men and women who are willing do their jobs effectively, if only we would make it worth their while, or threaten their livelihoods.

The rapidly emerging school-choice movement, incidentally, is at risk of making a similar mistake, assuming that competitive effects alone or freeing teachers from bureaucratic and union constraints will unleash untapped dynamism and drive better outcomes. In fact, if the fundamental problem lies in basic competence—in not the delivery mechanism but the education product—changing the roof under which instruction occurs will do little.

Consider an analogy: Imagine that decades of policymaking were aimed not at improving public education but at fixing the Ford Edsel, one of the most infamous failures in American business history. Legislators, aided by researchers and think-tankers, would analyze which auto plants were producing the best-selling Edsels, reward the employees, and encourage them to open more plants. Factories whose vehicles sold poorly would be placed under state supervision and put on improvement plans. Policymakers would introduce merit pay or argue for higher salaries to attract better, more-talented assembly line workers. Ambitious and innovative lawmakers might even be persuaded to view the problem as the factory itself or the unionized workforce. They would encourage the development of small, agile, union-free auto shops and grant them charters . . . to build more Edsels.

Borsuk tacitly acknowledges the limits of policymaking in his discussion of reading reforms and the current "science of reading" movement. He notes that this wave of reform "will be a major, even crucial test of whether top-down initiatives can work." While I am a strong proponent of these practice-based reforms, I share his concerns—not as a test of policy potency but as a test of implementation. He cites Emily Hanford's and Mark Seidenberg's various work, which has resonated with teachers in recent years and led a dramatic rethinking in how we teach reading. Both wisely counsel not to expect too much too soon; changes in classroom practice happen gradually—and not because policymakers demand it. As my American Enterprise Institute colleague Rick Hess has pointed out, it's easy to make people do things; it's much harder to make them do those things well.

In sum, the issue is not that there are no solutions. The challenge lies in the fact that we cannot legislate or assume competence. While there is certainly ample room for more modesty in our aims and expectations, sustainable improvement in education requires a focus on the practical, everyday realities of teaching and learning, coupled with policies that support and enhance these practices rather than simply mandate them.

The energy, commitment, and moral clarity characterizing the NCLB era of education reform were commendable. That the results have often been disappointing should prompt us to reconsider our approach. What if, instead of exclusively pulling policy levers, we redirected the reform movement's energy and enthusiasm toward improving classroom practice? Such a shift could yield more substantial and lasting improvements in educational outcomes.

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Another View of Educational Policymaking Since *Brown*

BY ROBERT LOWE

Alan Borsuk is dismayed by what he sees as lack of progress in educational achievement. He cites, especially, undiminished group disparities in recent years, and he lists a promiscuous assortment of reforms that do not appear to have accomplished much. Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress over the last two decades tend to confirm his concern. Yet stasis determined by a single measure of progress during a relatively short time frame runs the risk of overlooking differences that reforms have made. It lends credibility to the sentiment that the government does not have a proper role in equalizing educational opportunity or, more insidiously, that the persistence of unequal achievement traces to the deficiencies of low-income, Black, Latino, and Indigenous children and families, rather than to how schools and other institutions have failed them. Such a perspective justifies underinvestment in those who have been provided the least. Of course, Borsuk simply means to stress the inadequacy of reforms.

Taking a longer view, however, what is striking to me is how much change, albeit insufficient, has taken place since *Brown v. Board of Education*—despite major educational reforms that have been compromised or ill-considered and in the absence of family-supporting policies that would promote learning. Changes in Black attainment illustrate this most powerfully. In 1960, for instance, 21.7 percent of Black adults in the United States had graduated from high school, as opposed to 43.2 percent of whites. Yet in each subsequent decade, the percentage for each group increased and the disparities narrowed, until Black graduation reached 88.8 percent in 2019 and white graduation rose to 94.6 percent. College graduation has a similar trajectory. In 1960, 3.5 percent of Black adults had a bachelor's degree, as opposed to 8.1 percent of whites. By 2019, the numbers were 26.3 percent and 40.1 percent.

Much of the explanation for this transformation initially involved matters outside of schools—the Great Migration and access to higher-paying jobs in the North; the civil rights movement that spurred the legal prohibition of discrimination in the 1960s; and the War on Poverty's social safety net that, on a less discriminatory basis, modestly expanded the protections forged by the New Deal. But school desegregation mattered as well. The Black struggle to end segregated schools was an assertion of human dignity and an effort to gain access to the same educational resources that whites enjoyed.

Few white people were willing to share those resources, however. Resistance ranged from the creation of voucher programs in southern states to subsidize racially exclusive academies for white students; to mob intimidation and violence in Little Rock, New Orleans, and Boston; to massive white flight from urban schools. And when desegregation did take place, it typically occurred on terms favorable to whites. Thousands of southern Black teachers and principals lost their jobs; the burden of busing largely fell on Black students; magnet schools with an abundance of resources were designed to attract white students; and Black students were segregated in less challenging courses through tracking. Where desegregation exists today, tracking and racially disproportionate disciplinary action remain significant problems, but a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions guaranteed that desegregation would be limited. Most importantly, *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) essentially immunized suburban schools from desegregation orders, and *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No.1* (2007) cast doubt on the legality of even voluntary desegregation.

Despite all of this, achievement disparities closed dramatically over the years when desegregation was most robust, and research demonstrates that desegregation itself strongly contributed to Black achievement.

President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty ushered in an era where education became the chief policy to remedy poverty and inequality, displacing more direct means, until the response to the COVID epidemic at least momentarily changed this at the federal level. The War on Poverty featured two less redistributionist and longer-lasting reforms than desegregation; in fact, they rested easily with segregated schools. Head Start has provided preschool for low-income children since 1965 and always has been limited in effectiveness by very low salaries for teachers, many without degrees. The original Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) provided thinly distributed additional resources to schools with low-income students, initially delivered to them in pullout programs at the cost of regular instructional time and ultimately through schoolwide practices. Although neither program affected test-score disparities, both have contributed to a modest improvement in high school graduation and positive adult outcomes.

A potentially more robust way of equalizing educational opportunity for poor children was driven by a Mexican-American effort to equalize funding between rich and poor districts, but it failed at the Supreme Court, which ruled in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973) that education was not a constitutional right. Decades of arcane litigation and legislation followed at the state level, which generally did lead to greater equalization, but this was often compromised, in part by legislative resistance influenced by the opposition of wealthy districts. Nonetheless, these financing reforms have been associated with academic gains, especially where funding to low-income districts has been the most generous.

As schools began to resegregate, most consequential educational policies were severed from the idea that additional resources should flow to those in the most need. One major emphasis was standards and accountability; this was epitomized by No Child Left Behind. Oblivious to unequal conditions within and outside of schools, it assumed that if educators were driven to work harder by the threat of penalties when any demographic group underperformed, educational outcomes would equalize for all groups. This drove teachers in major urban districts to ignore subjects beyond the tested ones of reading and math, while narrowing their pedagogy to drill and test preparation. More homogeneous affluent districts, in contrast, escaped sanctions and carried on with their much more enriched curricula.

School choice also is predicated on the assumption that lack of resources isn't the cause of educational inequality, but rather lack of competition is, and dollar amounts attached to vouchers and charter schools typically are far less than conventional per-pupil expenditures. Choice legislation has had little effect on affluent suburbs where parents can assume quality education as a right, while in major urban districts Black and Latino students are merely given the right to compete for a quality education in a marketplace where the supply of high-performing schools is scarce and elite suburban and private schools are mostly off limits. Some form of choice is now pervasive in many urban districts, but choosing equality is elusive.

Finally, recent "science of reading" legislation in many states assumes the problem isn't resources but rather how teachers teach. The so-called "Mississippi miracle" perfectly illustrates this—impressive gains in fourth-grade reading despite per-pupil funding that is the sixth lowest in the country and one of the flimsiest social safety nets as well. Like Borsuk, I am skeptical. Third graders who are unable to pass a reading test are held back, and currently Mississippi eighth-grade reading scores are lower than in 38 states and only two points higher than they were in 1998, with essentially the same Black/white disparity. It would not be surprising if instruction of students in low-income schools, where Black students are concentrated, overemphasizes phonics and phonemic awareness at the expense of language-rich environments that the science of reading actually supports.

Desegregation long ago dropped from the educational policy agenda, yet the problem of segregation remains. This is not because schools are Black or Latino, but, as recent research has shown, because many are also poor, and poor people's schools typically provide a poor education, foremost because they cannot attract high-quality teachers. Consequently, those who face the most difficult circumstances outside of school also generally get the worst schools. Substantially greater funding for these schools would not guarantee that it would be used to hire academically and pedagogically accomplished teachers, that there would be an intellectually engaging curriculum in a high-demand/high-support environment, and that there would be "a sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil" to use W. E. B. Du Bois's phrase. But without such funding, the possibilities for change are severely limited. The logic of recent reform, in any case, does not support a funding-focused effort, nor is there the political will to pursue it.

The turn away from a redistributive approach to educational reform can be reversed and amplified, but current social norms that promote individualism, personal responsibility, and the unlimited accumulation of wealth do not encourage this. In fact, since the economic returns to education have become increasingly high in the United States, those with power and privilege are incentivized to hoard superior educational opportunities for the credentials that will preserve the status of their children.

The history of school reform since *Brown* demonstrates, in any case, that small increases in opportunity have historically made a difference, but if we want to see dramatically more equal educational outcomes, we'll need to have a more equal society. Perhaps the best educational reform in recent years wasn't an educational reform, but President Biden's short-lived Child Tax Credit expansion, which reduced child poverty by nearly 50 percent.

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actions were needed. No more Mr. Nice Law, if you will; more formally, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The new legislative initiative attracted overwhelming support. Bush signed the law in early 2002, with Democratic Sen. Edward M. Kennedy at his side.

The law set goals for improvement in every public school and school district nationwide, especially those where students had overall low achievement. It required, for the first time, that all states have students in most grades take annual standardized tests in reading and in math and, in some years, in other core subjects. And it required that the district-level results be made public, including a breakout of data on the performance of groups by race and ethnicity, by income, and by whether students had special-education needs. Improvement in each subgroup was to be a key to assessing whether schools were making adequate progress. One effect was to require improvement, for the first time, in overall outcomes for special-education students. The law also called for improving the overall qualifications and quality of the teacher workforce. And it included sanctions on schools and districts that didn't measure up, including the development and implementation of "improvement plans," superintended by higher levels of government.

The result was the creation of elaborate programs that set requirements and timetables for meeting the law's goals. An array of acronyms—such as NCLB, AYP (adequate yearly progress), SIFI (school identified for improvement), DIFI (district identified for improvement)—became parts of education jargon for a few years. To this day, the law's advocates point to some improvements in national test score trends, but the movement was relatively slight. One thing the law did accomplish: The annual testing nationwide brought a wealth of data, disaggregated by race and other groupings, which put the gaps in education success firmly in the spotlight so that no one could dismiss the issue. Not nothing, but not much else.

The law was set to be reauthorized in 2014, but, amid increased partisan polarization, differences over what paths to pursue in education improvement, and general dissatisfaction with the law's results, there was little progress toward agreement in Congress until a compromise was reached at the end of 2015, near the end of President Barack Obama's second term. The resulting bill—known (cynically, some suggest) as the Every Student Succeeds Act—brought a broad retreat from federal involvement in state and local education policies.

Almost all of the No Child Left Behind structures were eliminated or watered down, except for the

requirement to give standardized tests and report results. The 2015 law calls for states to make progress in closing achievement gaps, focusing particularly on schools in the bottom 5 percent of overall success. But it has no substantial enforcement provisions. The clearest sign of the breadth of the retreat is the minimal attention the law now receives from educators, politicians, or the general public. Quite unlike the 2001 law, how many people know even the name of the 2015 law?

Those 5 percent of low-success schools are required to have plans for "comprehensive support and improvement." But in January 2024, more than eight years after the law's passage, the U.S. General Accounting Office issued a report concluding that, among those schools, only 42 percent had plans that addressed the three broad requirements of the law and that there was "wide variation" in the plans. Reacting to the report, Anne Hyslop, director of policy development for the nonprofit advocacy organization All4Ed, told *Education Week*, "The state of school improvement is just dismal."

While 2001's No Child Left Behind is the most comprehensive failure of policymakers in demanding big action but bringing little positive result, it is hardly the only one. Consider just the names of other initiatives over the years, arising both from within government and, in some cases, from education leaders, nonprofits, or academia: The Race to the Top. The Common Core. Standards and accountability systems. Reading reform plans. Math reform plans. Teacher-pay-for-performance experiments. A large initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create many small high schools. Teach for America. Title I. Court-ordered school desegregation. The long-standing federally funded Head Start program, which has provided early-childhood care and programming to millions of low-income children but has not closed gaps in success. The rise of school choice, involving both private schools and charter schools, which offers a wide range of options but has not changed the overall picture of educational success. Changes in school structures, leadership styles, curriculum choices, and teaching philosophies.

And, across the nation, there are scores, probably even hundreds, of state and local reforms, often described before enactment as steps toward wider education success—and almost always bringing results that fall short. The overall history has a clear theme of big talk and small impact.

AND NOW, READING REFORM

The "reading wars," as they often have been described, go back decades—to the 1990s, some say, or even the 1950s, say others. Differences over the best way to teach youngsters to read may seem academic, not just literally but figuratively. But at the classroom level, they are significant, and feelings among advocates have a long history of being heated. On the one hand, there is strong support for teaching reading in a way that emphasizes sounding out letters and "decoding" words letter by letter, which is generally labeled "phonics." On the other hand, many reading educators have used approaches that emphasize leading children to recognize whole words—to learn to read by reading, as some put it. That includes using the context for words or cues such as pictures to figure out what a word is. The approach often downplays sounding words out letter by letter, and it is generally labeled "whole language" or, more recently, "balanced literacy."

But, amid the many rounds of debate and rising and falling trends, results have not been great when it comes to how many children become capable readers. In the broad picture, about a third of American schoolchildren read well below grade level, and another third or more read adequately but not at a strong level of proficiency. Students with weak reading skills are found across the gamut of living circumstances—income, race, ethnicity, and so on—but are concentrated among low-income children and Black and Latino children.

In the late 1990s, a group of experts, at the request of Congress, came together as what was called the National Reading Panel. They analyzed research and trends and, in 2000, issued a voluminous report, which found there to be research-backed science that could guide teaching reading and lead to wider success. The report advocated for efforts built on five pillars, two of them involving phonics and what is called phonemic awareness. The recommendations around phonics attracted (and continue to attract) the most attention. The other pillars included building fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But the following years were largely a time when balanced-literacy advocates held the upper hand in schools across the United States—without much improvement to show for the effort.

One thing that spurred a surge of fresh advocacy for using phonics was the success of Mississippi

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The Problem Is Us

BY MIKE GOUSHA

Some years ago (in the spring of 2010), I hosted a panel of former Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) superintendents at Marquette University Law School. They talked about their respective experiences—good and bad—leading the state's largest school district. With new superintendent Gregory Thornton in the audience, his predecessors bluntly discussed their tenures and frustrations, including the inability to measurably improve student outcomes. One of them, Robert Peterkin, who ran MPS from 1988 to 1991, said he regretted that he had not pushed hard enough for bold reform in the district.

"We should have done it twice as much, twice as deep, and twice as fast," Peterkin lamented.

That comment has stayed with me because it embodied the belief that leaders in education, as well as state and federal lawmakers, can effectuate bold, meaningful change. And yet, as my colleague Alan Borsuk points out in his thoughtful essay in this magazine, that change has been hard to come by.

My 40-plus years of experience as a journalist have led me to conclude that we may be expecting too much from our leaders in education and politics. While it is easy to blame the "educrats" and politicians for failing to significantly move the needle on issues such as the racial achievement gap, their lack of success is often a reflection of the interests, values, and priorities of the people whom they serve or represent. In other words, often the problem is us.

"Us" includes the many Americans who are understandably pleased with their children's schools, who live in safe, stable neighborhoods, and who have the means to access and experience a high-quality education. They are comfortable with the status quo. They are unlikely to embrace bold initiatives or change unless it works to their advantage. Poor academic performance, especially in urban districts like Milwaukee, is someone else's problem. Not theirs.

"Us" also includes residents in Milwaukee, where too many remain too silent about the struggles of our schools, both public and private. A kind of apathy exists. In many Milwaukee school board elections, fewer than one out of six registered voters cast a ballot, a level of civic participation Mayor Cavalier Johnson has called "shameful."

"Us" includes those fixated on fighting culture wars rather than focused on improving students' math and reading scores. Discussions on book bans, critical race theory, and what is taught as American history often overshadow the urgent need to produce better academic outcomes for students.

And "us" is a culture that too often diminishes the value of an education and makes teachers, principals, and administrators the scapegoat for poor performance, even though the lives of the children they teach can often be chaotic outside the classroom.

I have come to this somewhat gloomy assessment in part because of decades-long conversations with

two former Milwaukee school superintendents. One was my father; the other, the subject of a documentary on which I am currently working. Each participated in two of the boldest education initiatives of my lifetime.

My dad, Richard Gousha, arrived in Milwaukee in the summer of 1967. He was fresh off nearly four years as state superintendent in Delaware. There, he had worked to make good on the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* by ending Delaware's dual system of segregated schools. There was resistance to integration in Delaware, and my father witnessed firsthand not only the power of the law to change societal norms but also its limitations when it came to changing public attitudes.

Two years before his arrival to the Milwaukee Public Schools, this district was sued for practicing discrimination. The Milwaukee school board fought the lawsuit for more than a decade, trying unsuccessfully to persuade a federal judge that segregation in the district was not intentional but rather the result of housing patterns in the city. By the time the district settled the case in 1979, my father had long since departed for a new job at Indiana University.

But in speeches he delivered during his tenure as MPS superintendent and in long conversations with me decades later, my dad reflected on what he had thought would happen when desegregation came to Milwaukee's public schools. As the debate over integration continued, white flight from the city began in earnest. In a speech on March 29, 1974, my father called for a school integration plan not just for Milwaukee, but for the entire metropolitan area.

"[T]o be effective, it would seem that integration could not be accomplished on a piecemeal basis," he said. "And it is from this realization that a number of education planners have suggested that the burden of integration must be shared by a larger geographic and population group."

Without a change in the current approach, my father warned, "High and middle socioeconomic whites will continue to flee the cities. Cities will increasingly become the residence of the socioeconomic poor. If this pattern of apartheid is not to occur, there must be some identification of structures to change those predictions."

The next day, my father announced his resignation. And much as it saddened him in his final years, he proved prescient. The court could order Milwaukee schools to integrate, but it could not change hearts and minds. There was little appetite for a metropolitan integration plan. Tens of thousands of residents left the city, most of them white. Today, the highest-performing schools in metro Milwaukee are largely located in suburbs with small minority populations and abundant resources to provide a quality educational experience. Seventy years after *Brown v. Board*, Milwaukee's public schools remain largely segregated. Fewer than 10 percent of the district's students are white.

If *Brown* was envisioned to be a potential game changer for education in America, so, too, thereafter, was parental school choice. At least in the eyes of some. But the evolution of the choice movement has revealed that support for choice grows when it benefits "us," instead of just focusing on poor kids in places such as Milwaukee.

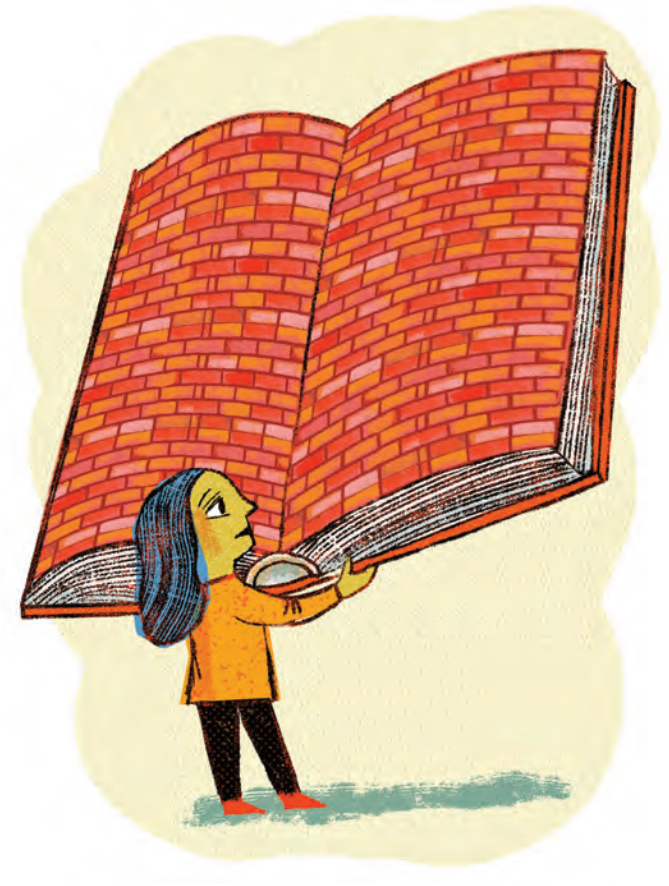
And that brings me to Howard Fuller, another former Milwaukee superintendent. I first met Fuller in 1981, when I was a young reporter and he was leading protests resulting from the death of Ernest Lacy. Lacy was a young Black man who died in police custody after being arrested for a crime he did not commit. Fuller's career has taken many twists and turns. He has advocated for change as both an outsider and insider, even serving as MPS superintendent in the early 1990s. Since then, he has been a leading national voice for parental school choice. Fuller sees choice as giving poor Black and Brown parents something that people of means have always had: the opportunity to decide where to send their children to school.

Now in his early 80s, Fuller has seen one of his dreams come true: construction of a gleaming new building for the charter school named after him, Dr. Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy. But he has also witnessed the energy of the choice movement move in the direction that benefits "us"—people who live more comfortable lives. More state legislatures are moving to lift income limits on vouchers or education savings accounts, the payments made to parents as part of a choice program. Universal vouchers mean that all parents in those states, even the wealthy who already sent their children to private schools, can now do so with the help of taxpayer dollars. Fuller disagrees with that trend. And during a lengthy December interview for our forthcoming documentary, he told me that the challenges his students face daily remain of little concern to too many.

"Quit lying about how important our children are to us," Fuller said. "Only certain of our children are important to us. The poor Black and Brown children in the city of Milwaukee, they are not a priority for the political structure in this country—because if they were, they wouldn't be experiencing what they're experiencing."

For Howard Fuller, the struggle for progress goes on. My father's fight is over. He passed away in 2019 at the age of 95. In our final conversations about how students were faring in Milwaukee today, he would sometimes be moved to tears. Both he and Fuller told me they failed as leaders of the state's largest school district. But if that is true, their failure is also ours. Meaningful change in addressing our biggest educational challenges will be hard to accomplish if large numbers of citizens are unmoved by society's educational disparities or are simply uninterested or distracted. We can blame the educrats and politicians all we want, but perhaps the problem is "us."

Mike Gousha is senior advisor in law and public policy at Marquette Law School.



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in raising reading success following passage of a state law in 2013. The law called for phonics-based teaching, training of teachers in how to do that, extra help in early grades for struggling readers, and retention of children in third grade until they could read on grade level. Mississippi had long been near the bottom of the nation in reading success, but it began moving up the ranks (based on student scores in tests that were part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress). In recent years, Mississippi has been in the middle of the pack nationally, and its improvements have been the strongest in the country overall. The law behind what some called "the Mississippi miracle" became a model for other states.

Along with other developments, including the wide impact of several sets of podcasts attacking balanced-literacy curriculums by journalist Emily Hanford, more than 30 states between 2019 and 2023 passed laws or launched policies promoting and, in many cases, requiring use of "science of reading" approaches, especially in early grades. In some cases, certain "balanced literacy" approaches, particularly one known as "three-cueing," which teaches students to look at context, illustrations, and other clues to figure out a word, were banned by law.

This is a large and fresh current example of legislators and executive branch leaders demanding improvement in success in school through steps they largely dictate. It is generally too early to tell whether the effect will be notably positive. History counsels skepticism. Even thought leaders for the changes have warned about not making the "science of reading" just another education fad that yields little.

"Just buying a new curriculum won't fix this problem," Hanford told about 250 reading teachers and others in late October 2023 at a program held in suburban Milwaukee by The Reading League Wisconsin. Furthermore, while ending "three-cueing" is a good step, that, too, is not enough, Hanford said.

In an interview during a visit to Madison earlier that year, Hanford expressed caution about expecting progress easily or quickly from the surge in reading reform. "I believe that understanding things helps," she said. But she added that policy is messy, there are unintended consequences, and there always are problems with execution of laws. And Hanford said the impacts of poverty and trauma on children are factors in making reading success difficult to attain. Interventions and individualized support for many children—steps that could cost much more than many schools can currently afford—are important, she said.

The work of Mark Seidenberg, a University of Wisconsin–Madison psychology professor, including his 2017 book, *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It,* has been influential among "science of reading" advocates.

Seidenberg said that improving the way reading is taught to children is an important step. But he also cautioned about expecting too much from that alone. At a conference in Madison in February 2023 and in an interview then, Seidenberg said that other aspects of the "science of reading," such as building vocabularies and increasing children's knowledge of the world around them, need attention. And he said that dealing with broader contexts of children's lives, such as improving early-childhood education and the stability of their living circumstances, can make substantial differences.

"The fastest way to improve kids' reading is to talk to them," he said at the conference. "We need to do more than pounce on three-cueing. There is so much more."

The nationwide surge of state laws and education policies requiring use of the "science

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The Body Politic Writ Large Does Not Care

BY HOWARD FULLER

Let me begin where Alan Borsuk's article ends: "[I]f the goal of education policy is to build a future of thriving adults—which is to say, to boost today's children—a lot more needs to be considered than what public policy usually considers now." What is this "lot more"?

In my opinion, there are already a lot more ideas (some good ones) out there on what needs to happen both in the schools and in the homes and communities of our country's children, who most need "a lot more" not just to be considered but to actually be done.

Borsuk is quite clear and correct that attacking only one side of the equation of all that happens inside schools and outside of schools would only continue to lead to the dismal results that supposedly "we" want to change.

All of the children in this country need our help and support when it comes to education and other elements of their lives. But the children who need our help the most are the children from the families of the disinherited. As the late theologian and educator Howard Thurman said, these are the masses of people who "live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed."

For the children from these families, we must tackle the difficult issues facing so many of them before they get to school—lack of health care, hunger, poor housing, sexual abuse in their homes, etc. And we must simultaneously take real actions to make sure that we're getting the best teachers we can to be with them every day. We must have better recruitment strategies, better support, better pay, better benefits, changes in the way teachers are prepared, the elevation of the teaching profession in the public discourse, etc. But if we have the best teachers in the world, with all of the support they need, and yet the kids are coming to school hungry or are dealing with some of the issues cited above, we will still see minimal impact—on individual students and on a large collective of students.

It is my fundamental belief that, unfortunately, more has not been done and will not be done because there is no real urgency in this country's body politic writ large to seriously attack the problems on both sides of the equation—in school and outside of school. There are and will be more speeches, more commissions, more tepid and underfunded actions, but there will be no relentless pursuit of actions that will lead to real solutions. There is no real anger, no real commitment to the children being discussed. We are willing to accept that millions of children in this country will indeed be "left behind."

The kind of deep systemic change that is needed is unlikely to occur because it would require a true "grand bargain" on all sides of the political spectrum. And given the deep level of polarization that exists in this country, that "grand bargain" is as far away from happening as it has ever been.

So the only possibility that I see for making any difference now is for people doing what they can at the level where this all matters—in individual classrooms, in individual schools, in neighborhoods, and in small nonprofit organizations. The goal should be to save as many kids as we can.

How can we pool our limited community and school-based resources to support our teachers? How do we use our limited resources to work with community-based agencies that are attending to the hunger issues or the housing issues or whatever issues our children are facing? This approach will not lead to broad systemic change, but it can potentially change the trajectories of the lives of so many children from the families of the disinherited.

We need small groups of dedicated, committed, and relentless people who will refuse to accept the situation now existing. That is the only hope that I see at this moment in history. Yet it is a hope: Margaret Mead was correct when she said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world . . . ."

Howard Fuller has been a national leader since the 1980s in advocating for changes in education policy, including support for school voucher programs and charter schools. He was superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools from 1991 to 1995. From 1995 to 2020, he served as Distinguished Professor of Education and director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University.

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of reading" in teaching literacy is at an early point. There are some indications in states such as Mississippi and Tennessee that it may bring positive results. It will take several years (or more) to find out how big the impact will be. Would a rise of several percentage points in overall reading proficiency be a success? Are the reforms being launched potent enough to bring much larger jumps in success?

The reading reforms are not a result of federal policy, but they are occurring across such a wide swath of America that they amount to a nationwide initiative. The reading wave will be a major, even crucial test of whether top-down initiatives can work or whether what is happening will be another big example of legislative overreach.

WHY DO INITIATIVES FALL SHORT?

It is good for political, civic, and education leaders to address the important needs of children, such as learning to become good readers and, more broadly, getting on track to successful lives as adults. But, beyond public funding levels, the limits on what leaders address—test scores, school structures, hot-button social matters, etc.—may in themselves frustrate the chances for their decisions to have positive impact. Here are seven thoughts on why big plans from lawmakers and others who shape school life so often fail to bring anything resembling the degree of desired improvement:

The impact of poverty. Even in high-poverty communities, there are schools and teachers that are leading children to success at rates much above the average for such circumstances. But they are relatively few in number, replicating them has been generally difficult, and their success may well be based on leadership qualities and commitment that are just plain rare. It is almost impossible—and certainly unwise—to ignore the broad reality that overall academic success of a school or school district correlates strongly with wealth and qualities of life that match wealth (reliable food sources and stability of shelter, to name two). Some experts argue that relieving poverty and increasing the supply of family-supporting jobs are the only ways to improve education outcomes. Maybe that argument lets schools and school leaders off the hook more than is merited. Yet poverty has impacts. The overall well-being of schoolchildren when it comes to their families and lives makes a difference in their education. For policymakers to proclaim ambitious goals or plans for improving achievement in school can't make the children's surrounding lives go away.

The state of culture generally. Mental health issues among children were increasing before the COVID pandemic began in 2020, and they have accelerated since then. The rapid and dramatic changes in technology and communication throughout society also have had great impact on children, with some research suggesting that things such as excessive amounts of time focused on computer screens or smartphones are detrimental to many children. And the social fabric shaping the lives of children across the spectrum of socioeconomic situations is far different now from a generation or two ago, with some benefits and some harms. Overall, is the cultural climate of the nation good in broad terms for educating children? Millions of children are doing great. But millions are not, and the tides of life around them may be a big reason why.

Early-childhood issues. In important ways, the gaps in educational attainment that show up across school years and into adulthood are there when children walk in the door for kindergarten. Largely along some of society's most recognized fault lines, there are big differences in how millions of children at age five are on track to thrive or not in schools. How developed are their vocabulary and their awareness of the world around them? Do they know the names of colors or days of the week? More broadly, have their social skills developed when it comes to engaging with other children or adults or participating in class? Some studies have suggested that schools as a whole do a reasonable job of keeping the gaps in success from growing across the kindergarten to 12th grade years but that they are not good at closing the gaps that were there from the start. And experts such as Nobel Prize–winning economist James Heckman of the University of Chicago have said for years that improved early-childhood programs, especially for low-income children, have great lifelong benefits. There have been improvements in early-childhood programs, but they fall far short of the overall potential for good results.

The intractability of the problems. The problems underlying disparities in educational success have roots going back many decades and generations. A crucial example: Issues related to race and the legacy of highly discriminatory

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Add Race and Racism to List of Reasons Reforms Flounder

BY SARAH CARR

For two years, Boston educators dismissed parent Roxann Harvey's concerns that her son was not learning how to read. They reassured the mother that some kids take longer than others and that she should simply read more with him at home. By the time he was in second grade, however, they suddenly grew concerned. "We'll all be lucky if one day he's able to read an article in the newspaper," one teacher told her.

I wrote about Harvey's journey to get her son appropriate help with reading in a 2022 article for the *Washington Post* and *Hechinger Report*. Many issues could have been at play in the family's struggles: A weak early-reading curriculum. Insufficient support for struggling readers across many Boston public schools. And race. In Harvey's view, it wasn't a coincidence that it was the only Black teacher at her son's school who finally stepped in to help her son.

In his provocative and thoughtful essay outlining the dismal history of (mostly) failed top-down national school reforms, Alan Borsuk underscores several reasons that initiatives such as No Child Left Behind have floundered: insufficient support for teachers, deep-rooted poverty, poor thinking.

We need to add race and racism to the list.

Borsuk describes in depth the reading reforms sweeping most states across the nation, including a renewed emphasis on phonics to teach young children how to read. Key supporters acknowledge that the new laws are not a silver bullet, given the challenges of implementation and the deep effects of poverty on children. This is true, but more supporters and policymakers need to acknowledge the centrality of race—especially the pervasive and pernicious lower expectations for Black children when it comes to reading.

While an alarming 30 percent of all 12th graders score below the basic level in reading nationally, 50 percent of Black students are in this category. Wisconsin consistently posts the largest racial gaps in reading performance in the country.

Controlling for income mitigates these gaps but hardly eliminates them. "Focusing on lower-[income] groups alone won't be enough to narrow racial/ethnic excellence gaps," concluded the authors of a 2023 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The report found that racial gaps in reading achievement were particularly large in the highest-income group. "Policymakers and practitioners need to wrestle with the fact that fewer high-[income] Black and Hispanic students . . . are achieving at advanced levels than we would expect given their [income]."

I have reported for the last four years on disparities in access to reading interventions and supports, interviewing more than 20 parents who cited race as a complicating factor in getting their children help with reading. Their stories are supported by data. In Boston, where Harvey lives, my reporting found that public schools with larger populations of white students tended to employ significantly more teachers trained in programs designed specifically for students having difficulty learning to read.

Nationally, Black students are notably overrepresented in special-education categories, including intellectual disability and emotional disturbance—categories that rarely, if ever, qualify them for additional help with reading.

A growing number of leading proponents of reading reform speak explicitly about these disparities. This group includes Resha Conroy, founder of the Dyslexia Alliance for Black Children, who was motivated by her own experience raising a Black child with dyslexia in New York's Westchester County. "I saw low education expectations for my son," she said during a 2022 national conference focused on literacy, "and I heard loaded language suggesting that it was okay for him not to read."

Nationally, teacher diversity has not budged significantly over the years, with about 80 percent of the workforce remaining white. Research shows that our schools and children suffer from racial bias in teacher expectations. One 2016 report, for instance, found that white teachers were less likely than their Black counterparts to believe that their Black students would finish school and go on to college. Teacher expectations could become their own form of self-fulfilling prophecies, the study showed.

Across the country, state lawmakers are talking about reading instruction more than ever before. And they are investing millions in reeducating elementary school teachers, the overwhelming majority of them white, in the science of reading. We need to take this opportunity to embed education about race and unconscious bias in this unprecedented mass professional-development effort so that no family gets the message that their child's capacity to learn to read is determined by the color of his or her skin.

Sarah Carr has written widely on education issues. She is currently director of the Spencer Education Journalism Fellowship at Columbia University. Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*, Carr's book on New Orleans, was published in 2013.*

Marquette Poll Finds National Majorities Think Parents and Government Could Improve Schools

Parents—that's who the largest percent of Americans think can have an effect on improving the quality of schools. And whom do people look to the least to help with school improvement? The federal government.

The Marquette Law School Poll asked a national sample of 1,005 adults in June 2024 whether they thought the federal government, state governments, local school boards, or parents can improve school quality. Respondents could choose more than one answer.

Overall, majorities of those polled thought each of the levels of government and parents can do things to improve education. That does not mean that they thought such things are being done, but they had substantial confidence that the things are possible.

Five out of every six respondents said parents can do either a lot (57 percent of the sample) or some (26 percent) to improve the quality of schools.

People expressed almost the same high level of expectations that local school boards and state governments can have impact on school quality. A total of 78 percent of respondents said that school boards can do things to improve school quality, with 47 percent saying "a lot" and 31 percent saying "some" with respect to how much this local level of government can do to drive improvements. For state government, 48 percent thought it can have a lot of constructive impact and 29 percent said it can have some impact.

As for the federal government, 30 percent thought that it can do a lot to improve school quality and 26 percent thought it could do some.

Fewer than 10 percent of those polled viewed parents, school boards, or state governments as unable to do anything at all to improve schools. The figure was 12 percent for the federal government.

How satisfied are people with the public schools in their own community? In this national sample, 12 percent said they were very satisfied, 37 percent were somewhat satisfied, 24 percent reported being somewhat dissatisfied, 20 percent were very dissatisfied, and 7 percent said they didn't know.

The Marquette Law School Poll was rated no. 3 in the country earlier this year, out of more than 500 polls, by the 538 polling-analysis project, behind only the New York Times/Siena College and ABC News/Washington Post polls. While it is best known for its work with respect to elections, the Marquette Law School Poll surveys public opinion, both in Wisconsin specifically and also nationally, on a wide range of public policy and social issues.

The Marquette Law School Poll was launched in 2012, and all of its results and data can be found at law.marquette.edu/poll. It was the only poll in the country to which 538, in its 2024 ratings, assigned a 10—a perfect score—on transparency.

How much can government and parents do to improve school quality?

A Marquette Law School Poll national survey in summer 2024 found that majorities of Americans think that all levels of government can improve the quality of schools—but that parents especially can.

Can do . . .	Local school boards	State governments	Federal government	Parents
A lot	47%	48%	30%	57%
Some	31%	29%	26%	26%
Only a little	12%	13%	22%	11%
Nothing at all	4%	5%	12%	3%
Don't know	5%	5%	10%	2%

Source: Marquette Law School Poll, June 21–24, 2024, interviewing 1,005 adults nationwide, with a margin of error of +/-3.5 percentage points. See law.marquette.edu/poll.

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education systems during slavery and in the post-Civil War era, in both the Jim Crow South and the highly segregated North, are not easy to overcome. No Child Left Behind was a noble and entirely worthy goal. But after so many years of leaving children behind, putting a halt to inequitable results is just immensely difficult.

The failure to improve the quality of teaching and to offer the support and environments that teachers need. Ultimately, whatever happens in school board meetings or legislative chambers or wherever large-scale decisions are made about education, the crucial action in education comes between a teacher and students, often behind closed classroom doors and with little or no oversight as to what is going on. Even the best teachers are known to think that they should keep doing what they think works with their students because education fads come and go and the teachers will outlast whatever is the current hot idea. And the teachers who aren't the best? They often feel the same way—that they will do what they think works and no supervisor or policy will impact that much. More broadly, the strains on teachers and teaching—both for individuals and in broad aspects of the profession—are enormous and continue to grow.

Inadequate attention to developing quality teaching. While there is agreement across the board that good teaching is crucial, little is done to put that belief into practice. Whether it is pay and working conditions, general lack of resources and support, stress, poor morale, the wear and tear of having too much to do in their work, difficult relations with some adults, limited training and mentoring, or simply limited ability, there are a lot of reasons why many teachers can't or won't embrace change and improvement in the way that policymakers hope. High turnover in the ranks of teachers and increasingly limited pools of talent to draw from in finding new teachers are also factors. And little is done to deal with all of this, especially on a large scale.

Poor thinking. Some of the ideas for reform are just poorly thought out or sound good in political discussions but are impractical or unrealistic. Go back to where this essay started, with the secretary of education of the United States saying that every student in the country would be reading and doing math on grade level within six years, even as it was sadly but indisputably obvious that this wasn't going to happen. Frankly, that was just poor thinking.

To conclude: In broad strokes, two of the biggest factors in a student's educational success are what goes on between a teacher and student and what goes on in a child's life outside of school. And those are two of the factors that people such as legislators, bureaucrats, and school board members have had the least success in shaping.

Is it a worthy goal to focus on the quality of education and to try to get the maximum number of children on paths to solid lives as adults? Absolutely. Schools can and do play important parts in children's lives—and they shouldn't be given a complete pass when it comes to assessing blame for why so many children are not thriving. But if the goal of education policy is to build a future of thriving adults—which is to say, to boost today's children—a lot more needs to be considered than what public policy usually considers now. And it needs to be considered wisely, candidly, and urgently. ■