

David F. Labaree

## Balancing Access and Advantage in the History of American Schooling

Today I want to tell you a story about the role of schooling in a liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I want to show how the most salient achievement of schools in liberal democratic societies is to engineer a dynamic balance between two conflicting goals – providing social access and preserving social advantage. In a political democracy, people demand access to social opportunity. And, since schooling has come to be the primary way we decide who gets which job, this means gaining greater access to schooling at ever higher levels of the educational system. At the same time, however, in a liberal economy, where a high degree of social inequality is the norm, people who enjoy social advantages are eager to preserve these advantages and pass them on to their children. And, since we tend to award the best jobs to those with the best education, this means providing these children with privileged access to the most rewarding levels of schooling.

What happens if you put the two elements together? You find that, when access to schooling increases, so does the stratification of schooling. More students come in at the bottom of the system in order to gain social access, and the system keeps expanding upward in order to preserve social advantage. Levels of education rise but social differences remain the same.<sup>2</sup> We want a society that allows us to have things both ways – equality and inequality, access and advantage – and our educational system is what makes this possible.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws inspiration from a lovely essay by David Cohen and Barbara Neufeld (1981), "The Failure of High Schools and the Progress of Education".

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Beck (2007) calls this the "elevator effect". For related work on this subject, see Gellert (1996) and Goldthorpe (1996).

In my talk today, I will be drawing on the history of schooling in the United States to show how this dynamic has played out over the last 200 years. The basic pattern has been this. At the starting point, one group has access to a level of education that is denied to another group. The outsiders exert pressure to gain access to this level, which democratic leaders eventually feel compelled to grant. But the insiders feel threatened by the loss of social advantage that greater access would bring, so they press to preserve that advantage. How does the system accomplish this? Through two simple mechanisms. First, at the level where access is expanding, it stratifies schooling into curricular tracks or streams. This means that the newcomers fill the lower tracks while the old-timers occupy the upper tracks. Second, for the previously advantaged group it expands access to schooling at the next higher level. So the system expands access to one level of schooling while simultaneously stratifying that level and opening up the next level.

This process has gone through three cycles in the history of U.S. schooling. When the common school movement created a system of universal elementary schooling in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, it also created a selective public high school at the top of the system. Then, when elementary grades filled up near the end of the century and demand increased for wider access to high school, the system opened the doors to this institution. But at the same time it introduced curriculum tracks and set off a surge of college enrollments. And when high schools filled by the middle of the twentieth century, the system opened access to higher education by creating a range of new nonselective colleges and universities to absorb the influx. This preserved the exclusivity of the older institutions, whose graduates then started pursuing postgraduate degrees in large numbers.

When you think about it, this is an example of the brilliant way in which liberal democracies manage to satisfy conflicting demands from competing constituencies. Schools allow both rising access and continuing advantage. They allow outsiders into the zone of educational advantage. And at the same time they allow insiders to barricade themselves in the upper tracks of this zone, while simultaneously allowing them to pour into the new zone of educational advantage at the next higher level of the system. Educational access steadily grows, average levels of schooling keep rising, and the relative advantage among social groups remains the same. The system of schooling thus provides something for everyone. Some people can pursue the chance to get

ahead and others the chance to stay ahead. Every time you raise the floor, you also raise the ceiling. The musician Paul Simon (1973) stated this principle succinctly in a song from the 1970s:

It's apartment house sense  
It's like apartment house rents  
Remember: One man's ceiling  
Is another man's floor.

That is my story. Here is how I plan to explore it. First, I will provide some background about the nature of the argument I am making here today. Then I will explore how this process played out in the history of American schooling across three stages of expanding access and increasing stratification: the explosion in enrollments in elementary, then secondary, then higher education in the last two centuries.

## I The Background: How Consumers Came to Trump Reformers

I came to consider the role of educational access and advantage by accident, in the process of writing my most recent book, *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling* (2010). My initial aim in this book was to provide a history of American school reform. I had been teaching a course with that title at Stanford for the previous eight years, and I thought it was time to turn the story I was telling in the class into a book. In this way, I was trying to follow in the footsteps of the two distinguished scholars who had taught the same class before me, David Tyack and Larry Cuban. The book they wrote was *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995), a lovely historical essay about the limited possibilities for school reform in the U.S.

So I wanted to take my own try at addressing this topic. But half way through the book, the story began to change. Maybe this has happened to you too. You set out to write one thing and it evolves into something else. Overall I think this is a healthy pattern for a scholar. If you end up writing exactly the argument you had in mind when you began, then maybe you didn't learn much from the process of working out the idea on paper. After all, writing is not an act of transcribing thoughts that are already fully formed in our heads.

It's the way we try to develop our thinking about a topic by cultivating the kernel of an idea in the hope that it will grow into a fully formed argument.

My original plan for a book about the history of American school reform began to fall apart when it gradually dawned on me that the real story was elsewhere. I had been wrestling with the remarkable ineffectiveness of school reformers in the U.S. This failure was easy to explain in light of the organization of American schooling and the patterns of teaching practice within American classrooms, which combined to prevent most reforms from ever getting past the classroom door. The American school system is very loosely coupled, which means that each unit in the system – school district, school, classroom – is relatively autonomous, making it hard for reform initiatives to move down the hierarchy, from what reformers want to what teachers teach. Exacerbating this tendency is the fact that teaching is a peculiar form of professional practice, which depends on the ability of individual teachers to work out a culture of learning with particular groups of students, one classroom at a time. So reforms have trouble working their way into schools, and teachers have good professional reasons for refusing to change their hard-won mode of teaching just to please some distant reformer.

Once I had worked out this argument half way through the book, I started losing interest. The rest was a process of elaborating and giving examples, so why keep writing? Besides, the more I looked at the 200-year history of American schooling from the perspective of reform, the more it seemed that the real action was in another domain. Schools were changing, and the system of American schooling was developing in fascinating ways, but all of this change was happening in spite of reformers rather than because of them.

If so, then how did this system emerge in its current form? The answer to this question came from a line of argument I had pursued earlier in my career but had considered irrelevant to the study of school reform. However, when I came to see reformers themselves as largely irrelevant, this alternative perspective offered a more promising way to understand the building of the American school system. The answer, I thought, lay in the hands of the educational consumer.

Consumers are a different breed from reformers. For one thing, reformers see schools as a public good, whose benefits are shared by all. Consumers see them as a private good, a way for individuals and families to get ahead or stay ahead in the social hierarchy. For another, reformers are deliberately

trying to change schools in order to make them effective at solving urgent social problems. Consumers are only trying to use schools to serve their own personal needs. They are not trying to institute change, but the accumulation of their individual actions nonetheless has an enormous impact on the form and function of the system. This impact is no less significant because it is unintended. A third difference is that reformers focus their attention on learning whereas consumers don't. Reformers see schools as a mechanism for socialization, in which students learn the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are required to address major social issues, such as by constructing capable citizens or training productive workers. In contrast, educational consumers approach schooling as a mechanism that allocates people to social positions. For them, its primary function is not learning but credentialing. By accumulating the tokens of schooling – grades, credits, and degrees – consumers can gain access to social opportunity and can preserve social advantage.

How do consumers shape schools? I point to two primary mechanisms: consumer actions and political pressure. By consumer actions I mean the choices that individuals and their families take in pursuing their positional interests through schooling. This includes: whether to pursue school at all and at what level; which kind of school to attend; what program or curriculum stream to pursue within a school; whether to terminate or continue schooling at a particular stage; and how much to invest time, effort, money, and foregone income in schooling at one point or another. Schools force consumers to make choices, and in aggregate these choices can exert a powerful impact on which programs and tracks and schools are going to expand or contract at a given time. As these choices pile up, the shape of the system changes accordingly.

The other mechanism by which consumers shape schooling is political pressure. By this I mean that educational consumers are also citizens, who can exert influence through sheer force of numbers in the political arena. It is in the nature of societies in general and liberal democracies in particular that the disadvantaged tend to outnumber the advantaged. The people who are enjoying the benefits of higher levels of education are fewer than the people who have lower levels of education. The logic of democratic politics means that when the outsiders seek greater access to the educational levels dominated by insiders, they can eventually accumulate enough votes to support their demand. But at the same time, the insiders are in a good position to

defend their privileges. They may not be able to head off forever the demand by others for greater access, but their positions of power - as owners, professionals, managers, and political leaders - mean that they are able to structure the new more-accessible educational system in a way that favors them. So they stratify the new zone of educational access such that outsiders enroll in the lower tracks, preserving the upper tracks for their own children; and they also send their children in greater numbers to schooling at the next higher level of the system. Each group uses its political clout to gain something from the process, and the net result is an increase in schooling without a change in the relative social position of the two groups.

The reason I'm telling you all this is that I want to explain the nature of the argument I'm making about the role of schools in liberal democracy. This is an argument based on a vision of schooling as a private good rather than a public good, as a medium of selection rather than a medium of socialization. My focus is on schooling rather than education. I am not arguing that learning doesn't matter or that education doesn't take place in schools. I am only arguing that you can understand the development of school systems in liberal democracies without recourse to ideas such as education or learning. These things may be happening in schools, but they are not necessary for understanding how the system of schooling has come to take the form that it has. My point is that consumers of schooling have been less interested in learning than in gaining or holding social position. And in the history of schooling in the U.S., the consumer has been king.

As a way to illustrate my argument, I now turn to the history of American schooling. In doing so, I look at three periods of educational expansion in the U.S.: the emergence of universal primary schooling in the early nineteenth century; the sudden explosion of high school enrollments at the turn of the twentieth century; and the surge in higher education after the Second World War.

## **II The Emergence of Universal Primary Schooling in the U.S.**

The creation of universal schooling in the U.S. is the exception that proves the rule. It is the one major educational reform effort in American history that

succeeded in meeting its goals; and the consumer did not play a significant role in the process. Once set in motion, however, the American educational system took on a life of its own, and the role of the consumer emerged quickly as a major and eventually dominant factor.

As in most other countries, the United States established a system of universal schooling for the purpose of building a nation.<sup>3</sup> In the early nineteenth century, the country was in crisis. It was a new republic in a world where republics had a history of not lasting very long. From ancient Rome to the Renaissance Italian city-states, republics over time had tended to veer toward tyranny. Civic virtue gives way to individual self-interest, and those with the most power and money take charge of political life. The founders of the American republic were acutely aware of this history and tried to build into the U.S. constitution safeguards that would ward off such tendencies. But they understood that, without a citizenry that was imbued with dedication to preserving republican community and a willingness to put aside personal gain, the republic was in danger. So from the very beginning, the founders talked about public education as the key mechanism for producing citizens with these necessary dispositions. But the form that education took in the first three decades of the nineteenth century fell short of the ideal. In American cities there was a move to create free publicly-operated schools for those who were too poor to provide for their children's education. But this only exacerbated social differences, leading to a public system for paupers and a private system for the privileged.

In the 1820s, this problem came to a head because of the sudden surge of the free-market economy in the U.S. This was the time when investments by states and by the federal government in canals and turnpikes spurred a dramatic growth in commerce and the emergence of rapidly expanding regional and national markets for crops and manufactures. As I explain in my book, this growth in markets offered great opportunities: for producers to get rich selling to distant buyers, and for workers to gain freedom from patriarchal authority. But it also posed great risks: for producers to be put out of business by distant competitors, and for workers to lose social and economic security.

---

<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of the creation of universal schooling in the U.S., see chapter two in Labaree (2010).

And all of this presented a serious danger for the republic. The surging market economy promoted self-interest over community interest and led to sharp increases in differences between the rich and the poor.

Out of this social, economic, and political crisis came the common school movement, which sought to produce a system of public schools that would be free and universal. The idea was not just to provide schooling for everyone but also to create a system where that schooling would take place in a way that everyone in a community would attend the same school. These schools were supposed to solve the crisis of the early republic by reconciling the new polity with the market economy. To succeed, this system was supposed to bring together all the young people of the community, give them a common educational experience, and instill in them a sense of civic virtue, so they would be able to function as self-interested actors in the market while still remaining community-minded citizens of the republic.

This model would only work, however, if the reformers were able to induce middle- and upper-class families to enroll their children in the new schools. In short, they had to overcome the stigma of pauperism that enveloped public education. They had to make the common schools truly common. And to do this, they deployed a very effective form of inducement. At the same time that the reformers created the common school, to provide elementary education for the many, they also created the public high school, which was to provide secondary education for the few. For example, when reformers in Philadelphia created Central High School as part of the city's new common school system, they made it an extraordinarily uncommon institution. It was located in the best part of town, with a marble façade, teachers called professors, and a curriculum that was better than most private academies and the equal of many colleges. To enroll there, students needed to pass an entrance exam. They also needed to be enrolled in the common grammar schools. Private school students were not welcome. This kind of selective inducement proved effective in luring middle class families to start sending their children to the new public schools.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account of the founding of Central High School, see Chapter 2 in Labaree (1988).



The common school movement was remarkably successful. Not only did it create a system of universal schooling at the elementary level but it also managed to blunt the social divisions and self-interested behaviors of the surging market economy. It drew everyone into the community school and there imbued them with the spirit of republican citizenship. And key to its success was the high school. This is the institution that helped make the common school common; but it's also the institution where enrollment was thoroughly uncommon.

So the kind of tension I am talking about – between access and advantage – was there at the very beginning of the American public school system. The only way the system could be broadly inclusive at one level was for it to be narrowly exclusive at the next higher level. The two elements were inseparable from the start.

### **III The Expansion of High School Enrollment**

Once launched in the early nineteenth century, the high school attracted the attention of families who were thinking of it less as publicly-minded citizens than as self-interested consumers. With everyone now having access to elementary schooling, the high school was the key zone of educational distinction. People who went there were special. Philadelphia was an extreme case; for example, in 1880 only one percent of the students attending the city's public schools were enrolled in high school. High school enrollment was more common in smaller cities and towns, but nonetheless gaining admission to this institution was a remarkable achievement; graduating put you in the educational elite. As a result, high school emerged as an attractive cultural commodity, a way to mark your children off from the pack. And enrollments in high school came overwhelmingly from the middle and upper-middle classes.

So what happened next? It seems obvious in retrospect: Other families started to demand access to the high school. After all, it was a public institution supported with public funds, and to deny access to qualified students was simply undemocratic. This spurred commentary in the press about the high school as an aristocratic institution unsuited to a republic. In a famous case in 1859, the citizens of Beverly, Massachusetts, voted on these grounds to dis-

band their local high school (Katz 1968, Part 1, Chapter 1). In general the demand for access got gradually stronger as the number of students in the elementary grades grew and expanded into the grammar school. Toward the end of the century, completion of grammar school – the first eight grades of the school system – was becoming the norm. By 1900, the average American 20-year-old had 8 years of schooling (Goldin and Katz 2008, p. 19). For these students, the next step in the educational ladder was high school. To deny them access would be to cut them off from the American Dream.

With the pressure building in the last part of the nineteenth century, the politics of secondary education became a zone of conflict. Cities tried imposing quotas to allow students from all sections access to high school, but this change in regional allocation did nothing to increase supply. Finally, in the 1880s city leaders gave in to the pressure and started opening new secondary schools. Initially they were often set up as manual training schools, which left the original high schools with a monopoly on academic secondary education; but by the first decade of the twentieth century these new institutions had quickly evolved under political pressure into comprehensive high schools, each serving its own geographical area.

Before this expansion, the city high school was an extraordinarily selective and elevated institution. For example, with a population of 850,000, Philadelphia in 1880 had only one high school for all the boys in the city and another for the girls. But the huge surge of growth at the turn of the century made the uncommon high school thoroughly common. Nationally the number of high schools rose from 2,500 in 1890 to more than 14,000 in 1920, and enrollments grew from 200,000 to two million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, H-424).

In the face of this flood of new high school students, what could the old high school's traditional beneficiaries, middle class families, do in order to preserve educational advantage for their children? There were initial efforts to keep the newcomers in special schools, like manual training schools or schools focused on training students for industrial and clerical work. But by the First World War these efforts at containment had failed in the face of huge pressure from former outsiders (reinforced by labor unions and political progressives), who demanded access not to a segregated vocational school but to a real full-service public high school.

The result of these contradictory pressures was a new form of school that came to be the model for how the system could combine the urges for access and advantage in a single institution: the regional comprehensive high school. This school drew an increasingly broad socioeconomic array of students from a single region of a city and educated them within the walls of the same educational organization. But once there, the school sorted these students into a series of distinct academic programs that were organized into a clear hierarchy. There was the industrial program, which prepared students for work in factories; the mechanical program, which prepared them for engineering and skilled trades; the commercial program, which prepared them for clerical roles in business; and the academic program, which provided a liberal education that prepared them for college and future roles in management and the professions. As a result, working class families gained access to the once elite realm of high school education, and middle class families preserved an elite niche within the high school while they also started sending their children in large numbers to college.

#### **IV The Expansion of College Enrollment**

With these new institutional arrangements in place, high school attendance went through an astonishingly rapid period of growth. Enrollments doubled every decade from 1890 to 1940, increasing from 200,000 to 6.6 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, H-424). Between 1900 and 1940, the proportion of 14- to 17-year-olds attending high school rose from 11 percent to 71 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1993 Table 9). During the same period, college enrollments also grew rapidly, rising from a quarter million to 1.5 million, and the proportion of the college-age population attending college rose from two percent to nine percent (U.S. Department of Education 1993, Table 24).

So in the early twentieth century, high school attendance became the norm for working class families and college attendance became the norm for middle class families (Levine 1986). For each group, this level of education emerged as what they needed if their children were going to have a good chance to get ahead or stay ahead. And by the time the U.S. entered into the Second World War, high schools were filling up. The large majority of eligible stu-

dents were already enrolled, so increasingly working-class consumers turned their attention toward college as the new zone of educational advantage. Attending high school could keep your children from falling behind in the competition for social position, but at this stage only college could help them get ahead.

As a result, the demand for access to the elite realm of higher education grew strong. Especially in the wake of the war, when so many soldiers had sacrificed so much, to deny such access was politically impossible. The G.I. Bill provided funds for veterans to attend college, which gave a big incentive for colleges to expand to meet the new demand. Enrollments shot up from 1.5 million in 1940 to 2.4 million in 1950. But long after the veterans had moved on, the rate of enrollment increase kept accelerating, with the biggest surge occurring in the 1960s. College enrollments reached 3.6 million in 1960, 8 million in 1970, and 11.6 million in 1980 (U.S. Department of Education 1993, Table 23). At the end of this 40-year period, the number of students attending college was eight times higher than it had been at the start of the war.

This was an extraordinary expansion of educational opportunity in a very short time. But the pattern established during the expansion of the high school repeated itself with the expansion of the college. The newcomers did not flood into the same institutions that had become the home of middle class students in the years between the wars. Instead, the higher education system created a series of new lower-level institutions to make room for the influx, leaving the college's core middle class constituency safely protected in institutions that, instead of becoming more accessible in the face of greater demand, chose to become more exclusive.

Until the 1940s, American colleges had admitted students with little concern for academic merit or selectivity, and this was true not only for state universities but also for the private Ivy League schools now considered as the pinnacle of the system. If you met certain minimal academic requirements and could pay the tuition, you were admitted. But in the postwar years, a sharp divide emerged in the system between the established colleges and universities, which dragged their feet about expanding enrollments and instead became increasingly selective, and the new institutions, which expanded rapidly by admitting nearly everyone who applied.

What were these new institutions that welcomed the newcomers? Often existing public universities would set up branch campuses in other regions of the state, which eventually became independent institutions. Former normal schools, set up in the nineteenth century as high-school-level institutions for preparing teachers had evolved into teachers colleges in the early twentieth century; and by the middle of the century they had evolved into full-service state colleges and universities serving regional populations. A number of new urban college campuses also emerged during this period, aimed at students who would commute from home to pursue programs that would prepare them for mid-level white collar jobs. And the biggest players in the new lower tier of American higher education were community colleges, which provided 2-year programs allowing students to enter low-level white collar jobs or transfer to the university. Community colleges evolved from junior colleges, which arose initially as upward extensions of local school systems, and quickly became the largest provider of college instruction in the country. By 1980, they accounted for about 40 percent of all college enrollments in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education 1993, Table 24).

These new colleges and universities had several characteristics in common. Compared to their predecessors: they focused on undergraduate education; they prepared students for immediate entry into the workforce; they drew students from nearby; they cost little; and they admitted almost anyone. For all these reasons, especially the last, they also occupied a position in the college hierarchy that was markedly lower. Just as secondary education expanded only by allowing the newcomers access to the lower tiers of the new comprehensive high school, so higher education expanded only by allowing newcomers access to the lower tiers of the newly stratified structure of the tertiary system.

As a result, the newly expanded and stratified system of higher education protected upper-middle-class students attending the older selective institutions from the lower-middle-class students attending regional and urban universities and the working class students attending community colleges. At the same time, these upper-middle-class students started pouring into graduate programs in law, medicine, business, and engineering, which quickly became the new zone of educational advantage.

## V Conclusion

So that's it. That's my story. It's about how educational systems in liberal democracies perform a kind of magic trick. They can continually expand educational opportunity without changing social inequality. They can increase educational access while still preserving educational advantage. Every time they raise the floor, they also raise the ceiling. In this sense, these schools systems are amazingly effective. They give something to everyone without the need to make fundamental changes in the allocation of social power and privilege. The social structure remains the same, and its legitimacy floats high and dry on a rising tide of schooling.

## References

- Beck, U. (2007): *Beyond class and nation: Reframing social inequalities in a globalizing world*. *British Journal of Sociology*, 58(4): 680–705.
- Cohen, D. K./Neufeld, B. (1981). The failure of high schools and the progress of education. *Daedalus*, 110(Summer): 69–89.
- Gellert, C. (1996): Recent trends in German higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 31:3: 311–319.
- Goldin, C./Katz, L. F. (2008): *The race between education and technology*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Goldthorpe, J. H. (1996): Class analysis and the reorientation of class theory: The case of persisting differentials in educational attainment. *British Journal of Sociology*, 47(3): 481–505.
- Labaree, D. F. (1988): *The making of an American high school: The credentials market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838–1920*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Labaree, D. F. (2010): *Someone has to fail: The zero-sum game of public schooling*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Levine, D. O. (1986): *The American college and the culture of aspiration, 1914–1940*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Simon, P. (1973). One man's ceiling is another man's floor.
- Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995): *Tinkering toward utopia: Reflections on a century of public school reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (1975): *Historical statistics of the United States: Colonial times to 1970*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Education (1993): *120 years of American education: A statistical portrait*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

1. Auflage: 2013

Bibliografische Information der *Deutschen Nationalbibliothek*  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-258-07823-6

Alle Rechte vorbehalten.

Copyright © 2013 Haupt Bern

Jede Art der Vervielfältigung ohne Genehmigung des Verlages ist unzulässig.

Umschlaggestaltung: René Tschirren nach Konzept von Atelier Mühlberg, Basel

Redaktion: die Herausgeber

Layout: Fabian Schmid

Korrektur: Claudia Bislin / Dorothee Weber

Printed in Switzerland

[www.haupt.ch](http://www.haupt.ch)