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## Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals

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*This article explores three alternative goals for American education that have been at the root of educational conflicts over the years: democratic equality (schools should focus on preparing citizens), social efficiency (they should focus on training workers), and social mobility (they should prepare individuals to compete for social positions). These goals represent, respectively, the educational perspective of the citizen, the taxpayer, and the consumer. Whereas the first two look on education as a public good, the third sees it as a private good. Historical conflict over these competing visions of education has resulted in a contradictory structure for the educational system that has sharply impaired its effectiveness. More important still has been the growing domination of the social mobility goal, which has reshaped education into a commodity for the purposes of status attainment and has elevated the pursuit of credentials over the acquisition of knowledge.*

Americans love to beat up on their schools. Particularly in the last couple of decades, we have taken schools to task for a multitude of sins. Among other things, we have complained that schools have abandoned academic standards, schools have undermined American economic competitiveness, schools are disorderly places that breed social disorder, schools waste massive sums of money, schools no longer provide a reliable way for people to get ahead, and schools reinforce social inequality in American society.

Many of these charges are unfair or even demonstrably false,<sup>1</sup> but the result of these complaints has been a lot of hand-wringing and an endless series of calls for fundamental reform. Big problems call for big changes, and a wide range of such changes have been suggested: Restructure the organization of schools; permit parents to choose which school their children attend; promote specialized magnet schools; establish autonomous charter schools; create Black academies; professionalize teaching; require competency testing for teachers; open up alternative routes to teaching; upgrade the professional education of teachers; establish national achievement tests for students; require performance testing as a prerequisite for endorsed diplomas; equalize school funding; make funding dependent on school performance; extend the school year; reinforce basic skills; increase vocational education; beef up the academic curriculum; develop national curriculum standards; increase multiculturalism within the curriculum; end bilingual education; stabilize the American family; provide economic opportunities for the poor; institute prayer in schools; attack the roots of racism; promote traditional values; and so on.

This widely varied array of proposed reforms, in turn, is grounded in an equally varied array of analyses defining the root causes of problems with schools. Some argue that the root problem is *pedagogical*, arising from poor quality and preparation of teachers and from inadequate curriculum. Others argue that the central problem is *organizational*, arising either from too much bureaucracy (the absence of market incentives) or from too much loose coupling (the absence of effective administrative control). Still others charge that the primary cause of educational deficiencies is *social*, arising from chronic poverty, race discrimination, and the preservation of privilege. Yet another view is that the key problem is *cultural*, the result of a culture of poverty, disintegrating family values, and a growing gap between school culture and popular culture.

In contrast with these perspectives, I argue that the central problems with American education are not pedagogical or organizational or social or cultural in nature but are fundamentally *political*. That is, the problem is not that we do not know how to make schools better but that we are fighting among ourselves about what goals schools should pursue. Goal setting is a political, and not a technical, problem. It is resolved through a process of making choices and not through a process of scientific investigation. The answer lies in values (what kind of schools we want) and interests (who supports which educational values) rather than apolitical logic. Before we launch yet another research center (to determine “what works”<sup>2</sup> in the

classroom) or propose another organizational change (such as school choice or a national curriculum), we need to engage in a public debate about the desirability of alternative social outcomes of schooling.

Schools, it seems, occupy an awkward position at the intersection between what we hope society will become and what we think it really is, between political ideals and economic realities. This in turn leads to some crucial questions: Should schools present themselves as a model of our best hopes for our society and a mechanism for remaking that society in the image of those hopes? Should schools focus on adapting students to the needs of society as currently constructed? Or should they focus primarily on serving the individual hopes and ambitions of their students? The way you choose to answer this question determines the kind of goals you seek to impose on schools.

The terms of this choice arise from a fundamental source of strain at the core of any liberal democratic society, the tension between democratic politics (public rights) and capitalist markets (private rights), between majority control and individual liberty, between political equality and social inequality. In the American setting, the poles of this debate were defined during the country's formative years by the political idealism of Thomas Jefferson and the economic realism of Alexander Hamilton (Curti, 1935/1959). The essential problem posed by that tension is this: Unfettered economic freedom leads to a highly unequal distribution of wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic control; but at the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the name of equality infringes on individual liberty, without which democracy can turn into the dictatorship of the majority. Each generation of American reformers has tried to figure out a way to preserve the Jeffersonian ideal of political equality in the face of the Hamiltonian reality of economic inequality—and to do so without stifling the productivity of the market economy. Yet in spite of a wide variety of plausible and innovative attempts to find a remedy, this dilemma has outlasted all efforts at reform. Political equality and social inequality simply do not mix easily, and institutions that arise from efforts to pursue both of these goals reflect this continuing tension.<sup>3</sup>

Grounded in this contradictory social context, the history of American education has been a tale of ambivalent goals and muddled outcomes. Like other major institutions in American society, education has come to be defined as an arena that simultaneously promotes equality and adapts to inequality. Within schools, these contradictory purposes have translated into three distinguishable educational goals, each of which has exerted considerable impact without succeeding in eliminating the others, and each of which has at times served to undermine the others. I call these goals *democratic equality*, *social efficiency*, and *social mobility*.<sup>4</sup> These goals differ across several dimensions: the extent to which they portray education as a public or private good, the extent to which they understand education as preparation for political or market roles, and the differing perspectives on education that arise depending on one's particular location in the social

structure.<sup>5</sup>

From the *democratic equality* approach to schooling, one argues that a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner. We all depend on this political competence of our fellow citizens, since we put ourselves at the mercy of their collective judgment about the running of our society. A corollary is that, in the democratic political arena, we are all considered equal (according to the rule of one person, one vote), but this political equality can be undermined if the social inequality of citizens grows too great. Therefore schools must promote both effective citizenship and relative equality. Both of these outcomes are collective benefits of schooling without which we cannot function as a polity. Democratic equality, then, is the perspective of the citizen, from which education is seen as a public good, designed to prepare people for political roles.

The *social efficiency* approach to schooling argues that our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence. The idea is that we all benefit from a healthy economy and from the contribution to such an economy made by the productivity of our fellow worker. As a consequence, we cannot allow this function to be supported only by voluntary means, since self-interest would encourage individuals to take a free ride on the human capital investment of their fellow citizens while investing personally in a form of education that would provide the highest individual return. Instead, society as a whole must see to it that we invest educationally in the productivity of the entire workforce. Social efficiency, then, is the perspective of the taxpayer and the employer, from which education is seen as a public good designed to prepare workers to fill structurally necessary market roles.

The *social mobility* approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions. The aim is get more of this valuable commodity than one's competitors, which puts a premium on a form of education that is highly stratified and unequally distributed. This, then, is the perspective of the individual educational consumer, from which education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles.

In an important way, all three of these goals are political in that all are efforts to establish the purposes and functions of an essential social institution. But one major political difference among them is positional, with people in different positions adopting different perspectives on the purposes of education. The democratic equality goal arises from the citizen, social efficiency from the taxpayer and employer, and social mobility from the educational consumer. The first goal expresses the politics of citizenship, the second expresses the politics of human capital, and the third expresses the politics of individual opportunity. Of the three approaches to schooling, the

first is the most thoroughly political in that it sets as its goal the preparation of students as actors in the political arena. The other two goals, in contrast, portray education as a mechanism for adapting students to the market. And this suggests another major differentiating factor, the way in which each goal locates education in the public-private dimension. For the democratic equality goal, education is a purely public good; for social efficiency, it is a public good in service to the private sector; and for social mobility, it is a private good for personal consumption.<sup>6</sup>

### **Three Defining Goals for American Education**

This article takes the form of an essay about the historical roots of these three educational goals, the impact they have had individually and jointly on the structure and process of schooling in the U.S., and the implications of this analysis for contemporary efforts at educational reform. In this section, I examine the nature of each of the three purposes of American education and the impact that each has had on schools. In the sections that follow, I explore the interaction of these three goals, showing how they have in some ways reinforced each other and in other ways undermined each other. This situation raises important questions. How can schools realistically be expected to promote all of these goals at the same time and remain coherent and effective? Yet, at the same time, how can they promote one at the expense of the others without eliminating important outcomes and abandoning important constituencies? I argue that incoherence and ineffectiveness are important consequences of this standoff among conflicting goals, which in part help explain many of the problems afflicting American schools. But I argue that the most significant problems with education today arise from the growing dominance of one goal over the others. The social mobility goal has emerged as the most influential factor in American education. Increasingly, it provides us with the language we use to talk about schools, the ideas we use to justify their existence, and the practices we mandate in promoting their reform. As a result, public education has increasingly come to be perceived as a private good that is harnessed to the pursuit of personal advantage; and, on the whole, the consequences of this for both school and society have been profoundly negative.

#### **Democratic Equality**

There is a strong ideological tradition in American history that sees schools as an expression of democratic political ideals and as a mechanism for preparing children to play constructive roles in a democratic society.<sup>7</sup> For the Whig leaders who founded the common schools in the mid-nineteenth century, this political goal provided the most compelling justification for schooling (Kaestle, 1983; Cremin, 1980). Although its relative weight among the trio of American educational goals has gradually declined over the years, it has continued to play a prominent role in shaping educational rhetoric, school practice, and the structure of the credentials market. And at times,

such as the 1960s and 70s, it has reasserted itself with considerable vigor and effect. This, the most political of the major purposes of American education, has taken three related but distinct operational forms within schools: the pursuit of *citizenship training*, *equal treatment*, and *equal access*. Let us consider each of these in turn.

The best single explanation for the founding and early diffusion of common schools in this country is that they were seen as an essential to the process of nation building and the related process of *training for citizenship* (Meyer, Tyack, Nagel, & Gordon, 1979). "It may be an easy thing to make a Republic," wrote Horace Mann in 1848 (1957, p. 92); "but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion." From the perspective of the common school founders, the new American republic in the mid-nineteenth century was still on shaky ground, and its survival depended on a citizenry with a fully developed sense of civic virtue. They felt schools could help counteract the growth of selfishness (arising from a burgeoning capitalist economy) by instilling in their charges a personal dedication to the public good. They could make republicans who would be able to function in a market economy without losing their sense of citizenship in the commonwealth (Kaestle, 1983; Cremin, 1980; Labaree, 1988).

Citizenship training has continued to play a significant role in the ideology and practice of American education in both rhetoric and practice. No pronouncement about education or call for educational reform has been complete without a prominent reference to the critical consequences of schooling for the preservation of democracy. Even the authors of the influential national report *A Nation at Risk*, who focused primarily on economic consequences, felt compelled to stress that "A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7). Curriculum in American schools expresses this concern, both through specific courses (such as social studies, civics, government, and American history) that are designed to instill in students a commitment to the American political system, and more broadly through a continuing strong emphasis on liberal arts over narrowly specialized education. The rationale for liberal arts is that all members of a free society need familiarity with the full range of that society's culture in order "to participate intelligently as adults in the political process that shapes their society" (Gutmann, 1987, p. xi; Hirsch, 1987), and as a result of this emphasis the U. S. promotes general education at even the highest levels of the system, in comparison with other countries, where specialized instruction begins much earlier (Turner, 1960). The recent movement to raise educational standards has made it clear that the call for increased "competency over challenging subject matter" is intended in part to "ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship" (National Education Goals Panel, 1995, p. 11).

## *American Struggle Over Educational Goals*

A second political goal for schools has been the pursuit of *equal treatment*, which originated in the same concern for preserving the republic that motivated the push for citizenship training. Fearful of the social differences and class conflict that arose from the growth of capitalism and immigration, the founders of the common school argued that this institution could help provide citizens of the republic with a common culture and a sense of shared membership in the community. Horace Mann stated the case for education's equalizing role with characteristic eloquence. Noting "that vast and overshadowing private fortunes are among the greatest dangers to which the happiness of the people in a republic can be subjected," he argued that "surely, nothing but Universal Education can counter-work this tendency to the domination of capital and the servility of labor," acting as "the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (1957, pp. 85–87). The common school movement promoted these ends by establishing universal enrollment, uniform curriculum, and a shared educational experience for their students (Katz, 1978, 1987; Katznelson & Weir, 1985; Labaree, 1988). Over the years, this commonality has given way to an educational process that is increasingly stratified according to characteristics such as age, academic achievement, educational level, curriculum level, institutional prestige, and social class—largely in response to pressure to promote the social efficiency and social mobility goals (Katznelson & Weir, 1985). But in the early 20th century, reformers sought to mitigate this process of stratification and restore equal treatment through a variety of leveling mechanisms, including pressure for social promotion of students from grade to grade, the easing of academic standards, the sharp increase in nonacademic curriculum options, grade inflation, and the institutionalization of the comprehensive high school (Labaree, 1984, 1988, 1996).

More recently, schools have sought to apply this egalitarian goal to groups whose ascribed status denied them equal educational standing in the 19th century. The recurring demand for equal treatment has removed the Protestant bible, public prayer, and other divisive religious practices from the public schools. It has motivated a powerful movement to provide equal educational experiences for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, and sex—resulting in the formal desegregation of schools and in attempts to remove race and gender stereotypes from textbooks, incorporate the experiences of non-Whites and females in the curriculum (through the movement for multiculturalism), and reduce discriminatory practices in the classroom. It has led to attacks on tracking and ability grouping because of the potentially discriminatory effects of these practices, fostering in their place such alternatives as heterogeneous grouping and cooperative learning. It has brought about the nationwide effort to reintegrate special education students in the regular classroom, so that handicapping conditions will not consign students to an inferior education. It has spurred the movement by states to equalize financial support for school districts despite unequal tax bases. It has promoted programs of compensatory education and affirmative action in order to make certain that educational equality is not just a formal



possibility but a realizable outcome. And it has helped support the recent demand by reformers that all students be held to the same high level of educational performance standards.

In addition to citizenship training and equal treatment, the goal of democratic equality has taken a third form, and that is the pursuit of *equal access*. It is in this form that the goal has perhaps exerted its most powerful impact on the development of American schools (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981). Equal access has come to mean that every American should have an equal opportunity to acquire an education at any educational level. Initially, this led to the effort that occupied school reformers for most of the 19th century, trying to provide enough schools so that every child could have a seat in an elementary classroom at public expense. After this end was largely accomplished late in the century, the focus of educational opportunity efforts expanded to include the high school, with dramatic effects. What had been a tiny sector of public education, enjoyed primarily by the elite, grew rapidly into a mass system of secondary schooling, with secondary enrollments doubling every decade between 1890 and 1940. Then after the Second World War, higher education became the object of the demand for equal access, leading to an extraordinary expansion of enrollments—to the point where attendance at a postsecondary institution became the norm rather than the exception (Labaree, 1990).

This pressure to provide access to American schools on a continually widening scale has necessitated an enormous and ever-increasing outpouring of public funds. In addition, the requirement that education at all levels should be open to all segments of the population—and not just the most privileged or even the most able—has exerted a profound effect on all aspects of the institutional structure. It has led to the mass production of teachers, the proliferation of programs and courses, the search for ways to improve pedagogical efficiency, the concern about enhancing administrative control, and the stress on fiscal parsimony—all in order to meet the educational problems raised by the sheer quantity and diversity of the pool of students (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981).

### Social Efficiency

On the one hand, Americans have sought to make schools an institutional expression of their democratic and egalitarian political ideals and a social mechanism for realizing these ideals. Yet, on the other hand, they have also sought to make schools a mechanism for adapting students to the requirements of a hierarchical social structure and the demands of the occupational marketplace. This second educational goal, which I refer to as *social efficiency*, has exerted its influence on American schools through structural pragmatism—operationalized within schools in the form of *vocationalism* and *educational stratification*. Let us consider each of these in turn.

The social efficiency goal has shaped American schools by bending them to the practical constraints that are embedded in the market-based structuration (Giddens, 1984) of economic and social life. One clear sign of

this influence is the historical trend toward *vocationalism*. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a heterogeneous alliance of leaders from business, labor, and education launched an effort to make the school curriculum more responsive to the needs of the occupational structure. While these groups disagreed about the desired effect of this effort on social mobility, they united in the conviction that schools were in danger of becoming socially irrelevant and economically counterproductive unless they succeeded in better articulating educational content with future job requirements (Lazerson & Grubb, 1974). Then as now, the simple reality was that students eventually leave school and enter the workforce, whether or not their schooling prepared them to carry out this work effectively.

In its narrow form, the movement for vocationalism sought to shift the curriculum away from courses that trained students in traditional academic subjects and broadly defined liberal learning and toward programs that provided training in the skills and knowledge required to carry out particular job roles. The result was the creation of a series of strictly vocational programs—which quickly became an enduring part of the American curriculum, particularly at the secondary and (later) community-college levels—preparing students for such future jobs as auto mechanic, lathe operator, beautician, secretary, and draftsman. The value of these programs, from the perspective of social efficiency, is that they offer a thoroughly practical education, which provides a steady supply of employees who are adequately trained to fill particular jobs. Nothing could be more impractical, from this perspective, than the kind of general education promoted by democratic equality, in which graduates would emerge as an undifferentiated group with a common set of broad competencies that are not easily adapted to the sharply differentiated skill-demands of a complex job structure. For example, following this logic, Michigan's governor in 1996 moved to shift funds from adult education into job training, since, as the head of the state Jobs Commission put it, "It's more important to align adult education programs with the needs of employers rather than to educate people for education's sake" (Cole, 1996).

Yet the impact of vocationalism on schooling has been much broader than what is reflected in this explicitly vocational curriculum, which has never accounted for more than a small minority of the courses taken by high school students. For example, only 16% of the Carnegie units accumulated by 1992 high school graduates were in vocational courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, Table 132). The true significance of vocationalism is visible in the philosophical shift that took place in the general aims of American schooling in the period following 1890. The essence of this shift was captured by the president of the Muncie, Indiana, school board who, in the 1920s, told Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, p. 194), "For a long time all boys were trained to be President... Now we are training them to get jobs." More important than the inclusion of typing classes alongside those in history was this fundamental change in the purposes of schooling—from a lofty political goal (training students to be citizens in a democratic society,

perhaps to be president) to a practical economic goal (getting students ready to enter the workforce, preparing them to adapt to the social structure). This change affected students who were going to college as much as those in the auto shop.

The social efficiency argument for education is found at the heart of nearly every educational address delivered by a governor or president, every school board's campaign for a millage increase or bond issue, every educational reform document. Consider the florid but not atypical language found in the opening words of *A Nation at Risk*, the report that kicked off the movement in the 1980s and 1990s to raise educational standards:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... We report to the American people that ... the 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. ( National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5)

Other documents in the standards movement have also prominently touted the economic benefits of raising academic requirements. The National Education Goals Panel (1995, p. 11), for example, asserts in Goal 3 that "By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter ... so they may be prepared" not only for "responsible citizenship" and "further learning" but also for "productive employment in our Nation's modern economy."

What makes this kind of appeal such an irresistible part of educational rhetoric is its immense practicality. The logic is compelling: Schooling supplies future workers with skills that will enhance their productivity and therefore promote economic growth. This logic allows an educational leader to argue that support for education is not just a matter of moral or political correctness but a matter of good economic sense. Schooling from this perspective can be portrayed as a sensible mechanism for promoting our economic future, an investment in human capital that will pay bountiful dividends for the community as a whole and ultimately for each individual taxpayer. After all, the majority of taxpayers at any one point in time do not have children attending the public schools. These citizens are not deriving direct benefit from the education provided by these schools, and they may well feel that the indirect political benefits promised by the democratic-equality rationale are rather remote and ephemeral compared with the immediate loss of income occasioned by an increase in school taxes. For this group, the social efficiency argument may well strike a chord with them by pointedly asserting that their jobs, their pensions, and their family's economic well-being depends on the ability of schools to turn out productive workers. At the same time, public officials who have to approve the annual budget for education—which swallows up fully one third of all state and local revenues (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995, Table 33)—

## *American Struggle Over Educational Goals*

also find the social efficiency rationale helpful because of the way it reassures them that this expenditure is not a waste of public money but, instead, a sound investment.

Over the years, the idea that schools should be making workers more than making republicans has undermined the ability of schools to act as a mechanism for promoting equality of access and equality of treatment. The notion of educational equality is at best irrelevant to the expansion of GNP, and it is counterproductive in a capitalist economy, where the pursuit of competitive advantage is the driving force behind economic behavior. Thus, under the pressure to be economically productive, schools have adopted a structure that is highly *stratified*. One form this has taken is in the emerging hierarchy of educational levels, leading from elementary school to high school to college and then graduate school. The upward expansion of enrollment in this hierarchy over time, while increasing the average years of schooling for the population as a whole, has also provided access to higher levels of education at which individuals can be distinguished from the herd, with the key division being between those who persist in education and those who drop out at an earlier level. From the perspective of democratic equality, this educational division represents a serious political and social problem. But from the perspective of social efficiency, the vertical distribution of educational attainment is quite desirable, since it reflects the vertical structure of the job market and therefore helps efficiently allocate individuals to particular locations in the workforce, as students move horizontally from a given level in the educational hierarchy to a corresponding level in the occupational hierarchy. And in the view of social efficiency, this allocation is seen to be both logical and fair, because those who have advanced farther up the educational ladder are seen as having learned more and therefore having acquired greater human capital—which promises to make them more skillful and productive employees.

These quantitative distinctions are further enhanced by the qualitative differences that have emerged between schools within each level of the educational system. For example, employers and students alike know that all colleges are not created equal. A degree from an Ivy League college is worth considerably more in the job market than one from a regional state university, since employers assume that a graduate from the former is smarter and better educated, which then makes that graduate a potentially more productive employee. As a consequence, college graduates are stratified in a way that reflects the stratification within the white-collar sector of the occupational structure. A similar logic is at work in stratifying high schools, with a diploma from a wealthy suburban high school granting the bearer greater access to advanced education and good jobs than a diploma from a high school in a poor inner-city neighborhood. Again, democracy and efficiency are exerting conflicting pressures on American education to move toward greater equality on the one hand and greater inequality on the other.

Even within individual schools, the academic experience of students (beginning in the 1890s) has become increasingly stratified (Oakes, 1985).

Ability grouping and curriculum tracking guarantee that even those who have completed the same number of years in school will frequently have had educational experiences that are quite different in both academic content and economic value. The result is the same as with stratification between levels of schooling and between schools at the same level. With students sorted according to both putative ability and the requirements of different job roles (high reading group vs. low reading group, academic track vs. vocational track), schools create educational channels that efficiently carry groups of students toward different locations in the occupational structure. Thus while the goal of democratic equality promotes schools that prepare students for the full range of political and social roles in the community, the social efficiency goal promotes a structure of schooling that limits these possibilities in the name of economic necessity.

One thing to keep in mind, however, is that, although social efficiency promotes the sorting of students and although this sorting often leads to the limitation of opportunities for these students, at the same time this goal provides strong support for the social value of student learning at all levels of the system. From the social efficiency perspective, society counts on schools to provide the human capital it needs to enhance productivity in all phases of economic life, which means that schools must assure that everyone engages in serious learning—whether they are in college or kindergarten, suburb or inner city, top track or bottom track. In this sense then, social efficiency treats education as a public good, whose collective benefits can only be realized if instruction is effective and learning is universal. As we will see next, none of this is true in the case of the third goal.

### **Social Mobility**

Whereas social efficiency argues that schools should adapt students to the existing socioeconomic structure, the social mobility goal asserts that schools should provide students with the educational credentials they need in order to get ahead in this structure (or to maintain their current position). Both of these goals accept the inequality at the heart of a market society as given, and both are eager for schools to adapt themselves to the demands of such a society. Where they differ is in the vantage point they assume in looking at the role of schooling in a market society. The efficiency goal focuses on the needs of the social system as a whole (adopting the perspective of the provider of educational services—the state, the policymakers who lead it, and the taxpayers who support it—and of the employer who will put the graduates to work), but the mobility goal focuses on the needs of individual educational consumers. One sees the system from the top down, the other from the bottom up. One sees it as meeting a collective need, and the other as meeting an individual need. As a result, from the perspective of the efficiency goal, it does not matter who ends up filling which job. As long as all jobs are filled with competent people, the individual outcomes of the allocation process are seen as irrelevant to the efficient operation of the

system. But from the perspective of the mobility goal, the outcome for the individual is precisely what matters most. The result is an emphasis on *individual status attainment* rather than the production of human capital.

One useful way of capturing these differences is to note that the social efficiency goal (like the democratic equality goal) conceives of education as a *public good*, whereas the social mobility goal conceives of it as a distinctly *private good*. A public good is one where benefits are enjoyed by all the members of the community, whether or not they actually contributed to the production of this good. Police protection, street maintenance, public parks, open-air sculpture, and air pollution control are all examples of public goods that potentially benefit all members of a community, whether or not they paid the taxes that were necessary to provide these services. In the language of public goods theory, public goods offer people a free ride (Olson, 1971). Schools that focus on giving everyone the skills required for effective citizenship (as proposed by the democratic equality goal) are public goods, for they offer a free ride to all children regardless of ability to pay and at the same time provide a benefit to all members of society (a sustainable political system, competent and informed fellow citizens) regardless of whether they or their children ever attended these schools. Schools are also public goods if they provide the human capital required by the economy and effectively fit students into slots in the occupational structure (as proposed by the social efficiency goal), since the community as a whole is seen as reaping the benefit from this institution in the form of a growing economy and a stable economic future. Once again, the benefits are collective in that they accrue to everyone<sup>8</sup> whether or not he or she contributed to the support of these schools or even attended them. Childless adults and families with children in private schools all enjoy the political and economic benefits of public schools when viewed from the perspective of democratic equality and social efficiency. However, one reaches a very different conclusion when looking at schools as a private good (Hirschman, 1970).

The consumer perspective on schools asks the question, "What can school do for me, regardless of what it does for others?" The benefits of education are understood to be *selective* and *differential* rather than collective and equal. The aim of pursuing education is for the individual student to accumulate forms of educational property that will allow that student to gain an advantage in the competition for social position. This means that what I gain from my educational experience is my own private property, and the more of this property that I can acquire, the better chance I have to distinguish myself from the rest of the pack and win the social competition.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of this perspective on schools is profound. One such impact is to promote the *stratification* of education—which, as I noted earlier, is also promoted by the social efficiency goal. The last thing that a socially mobile educational consumer wants out of education is the kind of equal educational outcome produced in the name of democratic equality. Thomas Green, D. P. Ericson, and R. H. Seidman (1980, p. 25), in their book, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System*, put it this way: "What

parents want is not that their children have equal opportunity, but that they get the best that is possible, and that will always mean opportunities 'better than *some* others get.'" This can only take place if education is structured in such a manner that the social benefits of education are allocated differentially, with some students receiving more than others (Boudon, 1974; Collins, 1979). In their role as self-interested educational consumers, therefore, parents want an educational system that is stratified, and this stratification takes the same three forms identified previously in the discussion of social efficiency (Hogan, 1987).

First, they demand that schooling take the form of a *graded hierarchy*, which requires students to climb upward through a sequence of grade levels and graded institutions and to face an increasing risk of elimination as they approach the higher levels of the system. The result is a system shaped much like a pyramid. As students ascend through high school, college, and graduate or professional school, they move into an atmosphere that is increasingly rarefied, as the numbers of fellow students begin to fall away and the chance for gaining competitive advantage grows correspondingly stronger. And from the social mobility perspective, the chance to gain advantage is the system's most salient feature. There is convincing evidence that consumer demand for this kind of educational distinction (rather than a societal demand for human capital) has been largely responsible for driving the extraordinary upward expansion of education in the U. S. during the last 150 years (Brown, 1995; Collins, 1979; Labaree, 1988; Hogan, 1987). For, as enrollments have moved toward universality at one level (first the grammar school, then the high school, and most recently the college), the demand for social distinction necessarily has shifted to the next higher level. Randall Collins describes the social consequences of this ongoing effort to establish and maintain relative educational advantage:

As education has become more available, the children of the higher social classes have increased their schooling in the same proportions as children of the lower social classes have increased theirs; hence the ratios of relative educational attainment by social classes [have] remained constant throughout the last 50 years and probably before (Collins, 1979, p. 183).

Second, since each level of the system constitutes a rather large category offering at best rather crude distinctions, consumer-minded parents or students also demand a structure of education that offers *qualitative differences between institutions at each level*. As a result, they want to attend the high school or college that has the best reputation and therefore can offer its graduates the greatest distinction in competition with graduates from the lesser institutions (Cookson & Persell, 1985; Kingston & Lewis, 1990; Levine, 1986). This kind of reputational difference can lead to preferential access to jobs and further education. This is why the value of a house in any community depends in part on the marketability of the local school system and why wealthy suburban communities aggressively defend the high status

of their school systems by resisting any efforts to reduce the striking differences between systems—such as efforts to redistribute tax revenues in order to equalize per capita school spending or to bus students across district boundaries in order to reduce class and race discrepancies between schools (Kozol, 1991; Rubin, 1972). At the college and graduate level, the same kind of concern leads to an intense effort by consumers to gain admission to the most highly regarded institutions (Klitgaard, 1985). Parents are willing to spend as much as \$30,000 a year to send their children to an Ivy League school, where the reputational rewards are potentially the greatest (Fox, 1993; Griffin & Alexander, 1978). As a result, universities are well aware of how important their reputational rank is in helping them maintain market position. “In the competition for resources,” says the spokesperson at Pennsylvania State University, “reputation becomes the great variable on which everything else depends. The quality of students, the faculty and staff an institution attracts; the volume of research grants and contracts, as well as private gifts; the degree of political support—all these and more hinge on reputation” (Eng & Heller, 1996). Within this status-conscious world of higher education, high tuition may not be a deterrent but an attraction, since it advertises the exclusivity and high standing of the institution (which then offers discounts under the counter in the form of scholarships).<sup>10</sup>

Third, consumers demand a *stratified structure of opportunities within each institution*, which offers each child the chance to become clearly distinguished from his or her fellow students. This means they want the school to have reading groups (high, medium, and low), pull-out programs for both high achievers (gifted and talented programs) and low achievers (special education), high school tracks offering parallel courses in individual subjects at a variety of levels (advanced placement, college, general, vocational, remedial), letter grades (rather than vague verbal descriptions of progress), comprehensive standardized testing (to establish differences in achievement), and differentiated diplomas (endorsed or not endorsed, Regents or regular). Parents are well aware that the placement of their children in the right ability group or program or track can give them an advantage in the competition for admission to the right school and the right job and as insurance against early elimination in education’s process of “tournament mobility” (Griffin & Alexander, 1978; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1976). As a result, they actively lobby to gain the right placement for their children, and they vigorously resist when educators (pursuing a more egalitarian vision) propose elimination of some form of within-school distinction or another, such as by promoting multi-ability reading groups, ending curriculum tracking, or dropping the gifted and talented program (Cusick, 1992; Wells & Serna, 1996).

However, since the consumer approach to education is so highly individualized, the kind of pressure that it exerts on schools in any given case depends on the particular *social position* of the individual consumer. For those at the middle and lower ends of the social structure, the aim is social mobility, a chance to move up, but, for those toward the upper end,



the aim is to hold onto an already attractive position and try to transfer this advantage to their children through the medium of education. Bourdieu (1986) defines the latter strategy succinctly as the effort to transform economic capital and social capital into cultural capital. In order to pull off this transformation, the advantaged call for an educational system that offers a variety of vertical options, which allow them to get their own children into the upper levels of whatever options are available—the most advanced degrees (MD, JD, PhD), the most exclusive institution at a given educational level (an Ivy League college), and the top curricular stratum within a given institution (the gifted program). But for the more disadvantaged families, these upper level options are a longshot at best, and as a result they may well see such options as a refuge for the privileged that undermines the chances for their own children to gain access to more basic forms of educational property: a decent elementary school, a high school diploma, a vocational program at the community college.

The social mobility goal, therefore, by portraying education as a consumer commodity, produces different kinds of effects on education depending on the social class of the consumers in a given educational setting, since the social position of these consumers affects their perception of their own educational needs. One result is that pressures for intensive competition and radical stratification of education are likely to come more strongly from the those at the top of the social scale than from those at the bottom. It is elite parents that see the most to gain from the special distinctions offered by a stratified educational system, and therefore they are the ones who play the game of academic one-upmanship most aggressively. It is they who can afford to bid up the price of a house in the right school district and of a diploma from the right college. In fact, the social mobility perspective often puts groups in conflict with each other, such as when working class parents press to get their children greater access to educational benefits (by being bused to a better school or being provided with stronger preparation in basic skills) and upper middle class parents press to hold onto the educational advantages they already have (by preserving their monocultural neighborhood school or establishing a gifted program) (Oakes, 1985; Rubin, 1972, 1976; Wells & Serna, 1996 ). This fractured and contradictory impact of the social mobility goal on schools, arising from its view of education as a private good, distinguishes it from both of the other goals, which view education as a public good that leads to a more coherent and generalized form of pressure on education grounded in the perceived needs of the community as a whole.

Another major impact of the social mobility goal on education derives from the way it treats education as a form of *exchange value*, in contrast with the other two goals, for which education is a form of *use value*. In the latter cases, the citizen and the taxpayer (or employer) place value on education because they consider the content of what is learned there to be intrinsically useful. Both look on education as providing students with a useful array of competencies that are required either for constructive citizenship in a

democratic society (democratic equality) or for productive work in a market society (social efficiency). However, things look different from the perspective of social mobility. The value of education from this point of view is not intrinsic but extrinsic, because the primary aim is to exchange one's education for something more substantial—namely, a job, which will provide the holder with a comfortable standard of living, financial security, social power, and cultural prestige.

Jobs tend to be allocated to a significant extent based on the quantity and quality of education that the applicants have, characteristics that determine a person's location in what Thurow (1977) calls the *labor queue*. And the easiest and most common way for employers to measure these educational differences is by examining the level and institutional prestige of a candidate's educational credentials (Spence, 1974). They assume that by selecting candidates with the best credentials (those at the head of the queue) they are obtaining employees who have acquired the highest level of productive skills; however, they rarely look beyond the credentials to test this assumption (Berg, 1971). As a result, educational credentials come to take on a life of their own. Their value derives not from the useful knowledge they symbolize but from the kind of job for which they can be exchanged. And the latter exchange value is determined by the same forces as that of any other commodity, through the fluctuation of supply and demand in the marketplace—the scarcity of a particular credential relative to the demand for that credential among employers (Collins, 1979).<sup>11</sup>

From the perspective of social efficiency, the use value and exchange value of education are inextricably linked, and therefore this distinction does not pose any educational or social problems. Drawing on neoclassical economics, the proponents of this goal argue that the exchange value of a diploma is simply a reflection of the human capital that it embodies. Accordingly, a higher degree is seen as worth more on the market than a lower degree because it represents a greater amount of usable knowledge, of knowledge that is economically productive (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). However, there is a wealth of evidence to the contrary, suggesting that, from the moment educational credentials came to be a primary mechanism for allocating people to jobs, the exchange value of these credentials began to separate from the learning that went into acquiring them. This emerging independence of educational exchange value from its connection to usable knowledge is the most persuasive explanation for many of the most highly visible characteristics of contemporary educational life—such as, overcredentialing (the chronic overproduction of advanced degrees relative to the occupational need for advanced skills) and credential inflation (the rising level of educational attainment required for jobs where skill requirements are largely unchanged) (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976; Freeman, 1976; Rumberger, 1981; Shelley, 1992).

Consider the effects of all this on education. When they see education through the lens of social mobility, students at all levels quickly come to the conclusion that what matters most is not the knowledge they learn in school

but the credentials they acquire there. Grades, credits, and degrees—these become the objects to be pursued. The end result is to reify the formal markers of education and displace the substantive content. Students learn to do what it takes to acquire the necessary credentials, a process that may involve learning some of the subject matter (at least whatever is likely to be on the next test) but also may not. After all, if exchange value is key, then it makes sense to work at acquiring the maximum number of markers for the minimum investment of time, money, and intellectual energy. The payoff for a particular credential is the same no matter how it was acquired, so it is rational behavior to try to strike a good bargain, to work at gaining a diploma, like a car, at a substantial discount. The effect on education is to emphasize form over content—to promote an educational system that is willing to reward students for formal compliance with modest performance requirements rather than for demonstrating operational mastery of skills deemed politically and socially useful (Steinberg, 1996; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986; Powell et al., 1985; Cusick, 1983).

One final consequence of the social mobility goal is to pressure education to take on a *meritocratic* form. From the perspective of the consumer, education is an arena for zero-sum competition filled with self-interested actors seeking opportunities for gaining educational distinctions at the expense of each other. This is especially true for families from the upper middle class, whose experience demonstrates the enormity of the potential benefit that can accrue from education and whose privileged starting position means that they also have a long distance to fall if the educational outcomes do not turn out in their favor. In this Hobbesian setting, the competitors are equally worried about winning and losing, about taking advantage of others and having others take advantage of them. The resulting atmosphere of mutual wariness leads to a collective call for the educational system to organize the competition in a relatively fair and open manner, so that the competitors with the greatest individual merit will be most likely to emerge at the top.

This approach to establishing a fair structure for educational competition takes a meritocratic form in large part because of the dominant place that meritocratic ideology occupies in American life. It is an ideology that captures in idealized form the entrepreneurial traits and values rewarded by a capitalist economy and projects them onto social life in general: the capacity and desire to struggle for advantage in a fiercely competitive social hierarchy, where success or failure is determined solely by individual merit. Whereas proponents of democratic equality have seen schools both as a hothouse setting for the practice of their political<sup>12</sup> ideal (and as an institution that could produce the kinds of citizens required by a democratic society), proponents of meritocratic principles have seen schools as a proving ground for their market ideal (and as an institution for producing individuals who can function efficiently in a market society).

Over the years, the meritocratic principle has embedded itself within the structure and process of American schooling in a multitude of ways. The self-

contained classroom, the graded curriculum, simultaneous instruction, and individual evaluation—the basic pedagogical pattern of modern schooling—emerged in short order after the introduction of the common school. This pattern was ideally suited to the construction of a model educational meritocracy (Hogan, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1992; Labaree, 1988, 1996). It placed students into groups based on similarity of socio-cognitive development and educational preparation, exposed them to the same course of instruction, and then rated them on the basis of their individual performance. The resulting structure, as Parsons (1959) and Dreeben (1968) have noted, has proven over the years to be an ideal environment for fostering interpersonal competition and individual achievement. By partially buffering students from the effects of ascriptive social influences (such as age and social class), this form of school places students in the midst of a meritocratic game characterized by a degree of formal equality that is unrealizable in real life. It accomplishes this by means of physical isolation from society, a strong norm of achievement as the legitimate criterion of evaluation, an academic curriculum (which provides a formally neutral field of competition), and a set of abstract and distinctively academic rewards.

Of course, meritocracy is much more visible in the upper levels of the stratified structure of schooling than in the lower levels. It is in the gifted programs, the advanced placement tracks, the wealthy suburban high schools, and the elite universities that competitive achievement is most intense, but, in the remedial classes, the vocational track, the poor inner-city high schools, and the open-admission colleges, the urge to compete is weaker, and the struggle for academic achievement is relaxed. Students from the lower and working classes see the possibility of social mobility through education more as a frail hope than a firm promise, since the experience of their families and friends is that the future is uncertain and the relevance of education to that future is doubtful. As a result, they are less likely to delve headlong into the meritocratic fray within education, often looking at educational achievement as a lost cause or a sucker's game (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Eckert, 1989; MacLeod, 1995; Oakes, 1985).

Despite the weak hold of the meritocracy on the lower levels of the educational system, however, American education defines itself in meritocratic terms and derives a considerable amount of cultural power from its position as the institution that tries hardest to achieve the meritocratic ideal (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy & Levin, 1985). The impact of this effort on the classroom is profound. We see it in the stress on evaluation—ranging from the informal question-response-evaluation triad that characterizes so much of classroom interaction—to the formal standardized tests that play such a significant role in American schools. We see it in the stress on competition, over such things as who can give the right answer, who can finish first, or who can attain the highest grade. We can see it in the process of *normalizing judgment* (Foucault, 1977)—rating the performance of each student relative to the others on a bell-shaped curve of student scores—that is

embodied in that characteristically American form of testing, the norm-referenced multiple-choice examination. We can see it in the construction of merit-based hierarchies of learners, such as ability groups and curriculum tracks and the whole panoply of other forms of educational stratification. And we can see it in the emphasis on knowledge as private property, which is accumulated for one's personal benefit (under conditions in which sharing is cheating) and which has a value that is measured in the currency of grades, credits, and credentials.

### **Historical Patterns of Goal Ascendancy**

Now that I have reviewed the basic characteristics of the three major goals embedded in American education, I would like to consider briefly the relative prominence of individual goals at different points in recent history.<sup>13</sup> At one level, the history of educational goals in the U. S. is a story of shifting priorities, as particular goals come into favor, then slide into the background, only to reemerge later with renewed vigor. These kinds of pendulum swings are what gives the history of educational policy and reform its episodic quality, with old issues resurfacing regularly in policy talk and with old reforms continually recycling through the educational system (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In the common school era (the mid-19th century), democratic equality was the dominant goal of American education; the primary outcomes education was asked to produce were political and moral, the preservation of the commonwealth in the face of the rise of capitalist social and economic relations. Issues of social efficiency and social mobility were visible but muted.

But late in the century, both of the latter rose into prominence. The potential for getting ahead via education grew increasingly into a potent reality, and the growing enrollments in the upper elementary grades began to precipitate a consumer demand for distinctive credentials at the high school and college level. At the same time, educational leaders were growing concerned about how to deal with an increasingly large and heterogeneous group of students at the high school level and how to prepare these students for entry into an increasingly differentiated work force. As a result, the progressive era (at the start of the 20th century) was dominated by social mobility and social efficiency concerns, and school curriculum and educational opportunity became markedly more stratified—with the invention of tracking, vocationalism, ability testing, and the comprehensive high school. The democratic equality strain of progressivism largely lost out to the kind of administrative progressivism that pushed these changes (Tyack, 1974).

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, the tide turned toward democratic equality (in conjunction with social mobility) as the national movement for racial equality infused schooling and spilled over into efforts to provide an education that was socially inclusive and offered equal opportunity across lines of class, gender, and handicapping condition as well as race. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, the momentum shifted toward the movement for

educational standards, which emphasized social efficiency (again in conjunction with social mobility). The standards effort reflected a growing concern about economic competitiveness and the need for education to supply the human capital required for increased economic productivity; it also reflected a growing worry about the exchange value of high school and college credentials in the face of their wide availability.

At another level, however, the history of American educational change is less a story of pendulum swings than of steady evolutionary growth<sup>14</sup> in the influence of one goal—social mobility—both in conjunction with and at the expense of the others. From this perspective, the most striking thing about that history is the way the consumer conception of education has gradually come to dominate the structure of American schooling as well as the policy talk about schools. It seems increasingly that no reform is possible, and neither of the other two goals can be advanced effectively, without tapping into the concerns raised by social mobility: the need for education to maintain its value as a consumer good that can provide individuals with social advantage.

The prominent role played by consumer-generated market pressures is one of the key things that makes American education so distinctive in comparison with educational systems elsewhere in the world. As Ralph Turner (1960) has argued, American education is uniquely influenced by a concern for promoting what he calls *contest mobility*, with the result that the system emphasizes winning over learning and opportunity over efficiency. A number of scholars have pointed out the ways that American educational institutions act in a peculiarly entrepreneurial manner in an effort to cater to the demands of their consumers. This market sensitivity is the result of a number of factors, including: weak state and even weaker federal influence; radically decentralized control; vulnerability to local political and parental influence; a dependency on per-capita funding (via state appropriations or tuition); the need to attract local support for millage and bond elections; the absence of general standards for curriculum and academic performance; the tradition of relatively free student choice in selecting classes, programs, and institutions; open access to higher education without effective standardized screening mechanisms; and a highly competitive buyers' market at the postsecondary level (Brown, 1995; Collins, 1979; Labaree, 1990; Trow, 1988). And as we have seen, the result is that American education at all levels is infused with market structures and processes that emphasize consumer choice, competition, stratified curriculum, the preservation of local autonomy (for schools districts and individual institutions), and a rapid response to consumer demand (Cohen & Neufeld, 1981; Hogan, 1989, 1990, 1992; Labaree, 1995).

### **The Peculiarities of Social Mobility: Interaction Effects**

Part of the reason for the powerful influence of the social mobility goal in the American setting is its remarkable flexibility. Over the years, people from a diverse array of political persuasions have incorporated this goal into their

educational rhetoric. The reason for the heterogeneous uses of this goal can be found in the contradictory elements that lie at its core. In the next section and the one that follows, I explore the nature of these contradictions by examining how the social mobility goal at times works to reinforce democratic equality in opposition to social efficiency and at other times works to reinforce social efficiency in opposition to democratic equality.

### **Social Mobility Versus Social Efficiency**

The social mobility goal for schooling, arising from the values and beliefs inherent in meritocratic ideology, embodies the liberal vision of free choice and limitless possibilities that has helped make capitalist democracy such an appealing model for the organization of political and socioeconomic life. This ideology promises students that through schooling they can achieve anything within the limits of their own desires and personal capabilities. The social efficiency goal, arising from the sobering reality of social inequality within the socioeconomic structure of such a society, represents the collective limits that confine these possibilities. This structure provides schools and colleges with practical inducements to imitate society's hierarchical form and adopt educational practices that will meet that society's basic structural needs—that is, to reproduce the current social structure by ensuring that children are competently prepared for and efficiently allocated to the society's full array of occupational roles and social positions. These two visions of schooling—one optimistic and expansive, the other pragmatic and restrictive—inevitably come into conflict over the course of development that schools should follow. In fact, much of the visible conflict about American education has boiled down to this difference between mobility and efficiency. Politically, this conflict has taken the familiar form of a dispute between liberals and conservatives. (A classic example is the long-standing fight over whether to increase the access to higher education beyond the minimum needed to meet employer demand [Labaree, 1990].)

However, a key to the power of the social mobility goal to shape the course of American educational history lies in the educational concerns that it shares with the democratic equality goal.<sup>15</sup> One of these is a strong shared interest in expanding access to education, and another is a joint understanding that, at least for the near term, schools should be made more meritocratic. For those concerned with promoting democracy, the effort to provide ever-widening access to education is essential for the production of capable citizens who are able to participate politically on equal terms. For those concerned with promoting social mobility, such a trend toward greater access is necessary if everyone is going to have an equal chance to get ahead. Although meritocratic schooling can and does undermine democratic equality by promoting unequal educational and social outcomes (as pointed out in the previous section), it nonetheless represents progress toward democratic equality to the extent that it introduces individual achievement as the basis for allocating educational rewards in place of allocation based on ascribed characteristics such as class, race, and gender.

Consider, for a moment, the basic political and ideological characteristics that define each of the three educational goals. The educational program for democratic equality has a political identity that is *democratic* and a social ideology that is *egalitarian*. The program for social mobility promotes classical *liberal* politics (based on personal liberty, free markets, and individual choice) and *meritocratic* ideology (promoting equal opportunity for individual advancement rather than equal outcomes for all). The political and social common ground between these two approaches is a territory that historians have generally referred to as *progressive*, which is a compromise between democratic and liberal politics and between egalitarian and meritocratic social ideologies. In contrast, the educational program for social efficiency projects *conservative* politics (grounded in preserving elite political control through the retention of differences in political competency and access) and a social vision that is *reproductive* (reinforcing the existing structure of social inequality by adapting newcomers to play needed rather than desired roles within this structure).

The two issues that constitute the area of overlap between the democratic equality and social mobility goals—educational opportunity and individual achievement—define the core of a consensus that has driven progressive educational politics in this country for the last century and a half. A disparate array of constituencies has rallied behind this program. Organizations representing the working class, ethnic minorities, and women have all seen this educational agenda as a means for becoming participants in the political process and for gaining access to the more attractive social positions. For the middle and upper classes, the progressive program offered the chance to move up the ladder another rung or two or to reinforce an already comfortable social position with the legitimacy that comes from being seen as having earned this position through educational achievement.

The successes scored by this coalition have been extraordinary. These include: the phenomenal expansion of educational enrollments over the years and the continual extension of educational opportunity upward into the secondary and tertiary levels; the sharp and largely effective attack on de jure racial segregation in schooling and similar efforts to reduce segregation and enhance educational opportunities for women and the handicapped; the dramatic growth in the public subsidy for education at all levels; the explosion in the number of educational courses, programs, and institutional choices offered to students; the emphasis on general over specialized education at all levels in order to preserve student options; the openness with which the educational system welcomes back students who have dropped out and then decide to re-enter the system; and the capacity of the system to consider both individual merit (grades, achievement tests, SATs) and community right (affirmative action, social promotion, open admissions) in determining access to higher levels of education. Most important of all these successes, however, is the strong trend in the United States toward a system of allocating status on the basis of a formal educational voucher of individual merit—that is, hiring persons because of their educational creden-



tials rather than their ascribed characteristics. In this sense, the rise of the credentials market itself is perhaps the proudest achievement of this progressive coalition. As Hurn (1985, pp. 135-136) has noted, allocation by credentials, in spite of its limits and negative side effects, may still be the most progressive option available, since it keeps opportunity open by intervening in the process of simple status ascription.

The primary opposition to this progressive strand of American education politics has come from the proponents of social efficiency. This group is also a complex coalition. There are policymakers (politicians and educational bureaucrats), who are worried about the high cost of supporting many parts of the educational establishment when the economic utility of this investment is slight. There are employers and business leaders, who fear that their immediate manpower needs are not being filled by persons with appropriate skills or that they will have to provide training for employees at their own expense. There are educational administrators, who are concerned about how to justify the social investment in schools and how to carve out a stable share of the competitive educational market. There are middle- and upper class parents, who are less concerned about getting ahead (given their children's reasonably secure future) than about containing the cost of public subsidies for the less fortunate. And there are working class and lower middle class educational consumers, who are more worried about getting a job than about getting ahead and who therefore want an education with clear and immediate vocational prospects.

In addition, at the most general level, social efficiency in education is a concern for any and all adult members of American society in their role as *taxpayers*. As citizens, they can understand the value of education in producing an informed and capable electorate; as consumers, they can understand its value in presenting themselves and their children with selective opportunities for competitive social advantage; but, as taxpayers, they are compelled to look at education as a financial investment—not in their own children, which is the essence of the consumer perspective, but in *other people's children*. The result is that adults in their taxpayer role tend to apply more stringent criteria to the support of education as a public good than they do to their role as consumers thinking of education as a private good. Grubb and Lazerson (1982, p. 52) put the problem this way:

In contrast to the deep love we feel and express in private, we lack any sense of “public love” for children, and we are unwilling to make public commitments to them except when we believe the commitments will pay off. As a result, cost-benefit criteria have dictated the kinds of activities the state might support ...

Thus the taxpayer perspective applies a criterion to the support of education for other people's children that is both stingier than that arising from the consumer perspective and loaded down with an array of contingencies that make support dependent on the demonstrated effectiveness of education in meeting strict economic criteria—to boost economic productivity, expand

the tax base, attract local industry, and make the country more competitive internationally, all at a modest cost per student.

For taxpayers in general and for all of the other constituencies of the social efficiency goal for education, the notion of education for social mobility is politically seductive but socially inefficient. Sure, it is nice to think that everyone has a right to all the education he or she wants, and of course everyone would like to get ahead via education; but (say, those from the social efficiency perspective) the responsible deployment of societal resources calls for us to look beyond political platitudes and individual interests and to consider the human capital needs of the economy as a whole. From this pragmatic, fiscally conservative, and statist perspective, the primary goal of education is to produce the work force that is required by the occupational structure in its current form and that will provide measurable economic benefits to society as a whole. As a result, efficiency advocates (in response to perceived necessity) work directly counter to many of the goals of mobility advocates—holding up the limited possibilities to be found among existing job openings as an antidote to the limitless optimism of the progressives, and promoting social reproduction rather than political empowerment or individual opportunity. While the progressives are actively raising students' hopes, the conservatives are arguing for the necessity of, in the words of Burton Clark (1960, p. 160), "cooling out" many of these same students. Be realistic, say the conservatives; we only need a few doctors and lawyers compared to the number of required clerical workers and machine operators, so schools should be trying to direct students into practical studies that will prepare them efficiently for attainable positions.

The struggle between conservatives (representing the goal of social efficiency) and progressives (representing the common ground between the goals of democratic equality and social mobility) has often been fought in this country over the issues of tracking, guidance, and vocationalism (Oakes, 1985; Church & Sedlak, 1976; Lazerson & Grubb, 1974; Katznelson & Weir, 1985). The former argue for guiding students into tracks (on the basis of individual abilities and preferences) where they are taught the vocational skills required for a differentiated array of existing jobs and then channeled directly into these jobs. The latter see this process as a mechanism that blocks individual chances for social mobility and political equality by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy—predicting a working class job role for a working class student and then preparing him or her in such a way that any other outcome is unlikely. The impetus for this form of social efficiency has generally come from the institutional leadership in American education (as agent for the taxpayer, policymaker, and employer), and educational consumers have generally resisted this effort with vigor and considerable success.

The history of American higher education makes this pattern particularly clear. The land grant college, teachers' college, and community college were all invented in large part as a mechanism for providing practical vocational

training that policymakers and educators felt was required in order to promote social efficiency. In each case, however, students successfully sought to convert these vocational schools into general-purpose institutions for promoting social mobility. They achieved this end by expressing a clear consumer preference for programs leading to the bachelor of arts degree over those that provided particular job skills. These students have understood the status attainment implications of the debate over vocationalism. Vocational training has meant preparation for the lesser positions in the occupational structure, while a BA has provided an entree to the higher levels of this structure. Both forms of education are vocational, in the sense of being oriented toward work; the difference is in whether a student's education blocks or facilitates access to the more attractive forms of work (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Labaree, 1990, 1995).

The end result of this conflict between progressive and conservative visions of schooling has been a peculiarly American educational structure, characterized by a bold mixture of purposes. On the one hand, education reflects the conservative vision: Its structure has a pyramid shape similar to that of the occupational structure; tracking within this system is the norm; there are a large number of potential exit points from the system; and there are also a variety of cooling out mechanisms that encourage students to use these exits and go to work. On the other hand, education also has a progressive cast to it: Tracking and other school choices are formally voluntary; the barriers between tracks are low; the opportunities for achieving higher levels of education are realizable; and, for every exit, there is the possibility of reentry into the system.

As a result, in American education, high levels of educational and social attainment are a real *possibility* for students, no matter what their social origins. The educational system never absolutely precludes this possibility; its defining characteristic is openness and a reluctance to make any form of educational selection final, the pattern that Turner (1960) calls *contest mobility*.<sup>16</sup> Yet the *probability* of achieving significant social mobility through education is small, and this probability grows considerably smaller at every step down the class scale. The reason for the latter is that students from the lower classes tend to exit from the system earlier than those from the upper classes, and the chances of succeeding grow more difficult with every attempt to reenter the system after exiting. In short, the surest way to succeed is to get it right the first time by staying in the fast track at each step along the way, as market-wise consumers from the upper middle class are so good at doing (Kerckhoff, 1993; Oakes, 1985; Wells & Serna, 1996).

This conflicted image of the American educational system—as a mechanism for attaining social status that offers unlimited possibilities and restricted probabilities—finds a reflection within the central character of this system's social mobility goal. For this goal occupies a political and ideological middle ground between democratic equality and social efficiency. On the one hand, it shares some of the concerns of the former and, in combination with it, has helped energize powerful movements of progressive educational

reform in this country. In important ways, social mobility has exerted an effect on education that is diametrically opposed to the effect of social efficiency. First, social mobility promotes expanded access to education, while social efficiency opposes this in order to hold down costs. Second, the mobility goal supports the concentration of resources on the highest levels of education (which provides access to the best jobs), while the efficiency goal supports education of high quality at all educational and occupational levels (to provide society with a full range of good human capital). Third, the mobility goal undercuts learning by promoting the acquisition of credentials with the minimum academic effort, while the efficiency goal reinforces learning by asserting the need to upgrade the skills of the workforce.<sup>17</sup>

But at the same time, other characteristics of the social mobility goal show a remarkable similarity with the social efficiency approach. The mobility and efficiency goals are both grounded in a pragmatic vision that sees the necessity for schools to adapt to the structure of inequality. Both subordinate schools to the needs of the market. And both lead to a highly stratified structure of education. The social mobility approach to education implies a pyramid of educational opportunity, parallel to the pyramid of available jobs, with the educational credentials market providing the link between the two. This model requires a high rate of educational attrition in order to be effective. Since there are only a small number of the most desirable jobs at the top of the occupational pyramid, education can only provide access to these jobs for a small number of students. Allowing a large number of students to attain the highest levels of education would be counterproductive in that it would put a crowd at the head of the labor queue (Thurow, 1977), providing no one in that crowd with a selective advantage in the competition for the top jobs.

Therefore, education can only promote social mobility (and simultaneously preserve the positional advantage of the privileged) to the extent that it prevents most students from reaching the top of the educational pyramid. It carries out this mobility and maintenance function by encouraging students to exit at lower levels of the system and by stratifying the credentials earned by students at each educational level (via curriculum tracking within schools and prestige ranking between schools). The result is that, in the name of social mobility, Americans have sought to push their education system in a direction that is in many ways directly opposite to the direction urged by the logic of democratic equality. Let us consider the implications for American schooling of the tension between these two goals.

### **Social Mobility Versus Democratic Equality**

The social mobility goal has a mixed relationship with the three elements that define the goal of democratic equality. Whereas social mobility shares with its partner in the progressive agenda a concern for equal access, it stands in opposition to the notion of equal treatment, and it works directly counter to the ideal of civic virtue.

*Equal treatment.* As I suggested at the end of the last section, the effort to create a school system that promotes social mobility is antithetical to the ideal of equal educational treatment. The whole point of such a system is to provide some students with the chance to achieve a higher social position by acquiring an education that is somehow “better” than the education acquired by most other students. To meet this purpose, then, schooling must be highly stratified. In this sense, the social mobility goal is congruent with the social efficiency goal. As shown earlier, stratification has become thoroughly embedded in American schools over the last century in large part because this kind of structure answers to the demands of both goals. While much of this stratification took place in response to the perceived human capital needs of the economy—for example, through the introduction of the vocational track—much of it occurred in response to consumer demand. Students who want to get ahead through schooling (and their parents, who want to create possibilities of success for them) have sought to transform common schooling into uncommon schooling. They have actively pursued educational advantage and spurred educators to meet this demand by developing such opportunities.

*Civic virtue.* Schooling students for citizenship means to implant within them the seeds of civic virtue. Yet schooling for social mobility undercuts the ability of schools to nurture the growth of this character trait and the behaviors it fosters: devotion to the political community and a willingness to subordinate private interests to the public interest. Unlike the pursuit of democratic equality, the social mobility goal focuses on the needs of the market rather than those of the polity, and, unlike the pursuit of social efficiency, it adopts a perspective on the market that is aggressively individualistic rather than collective. In combination, these mobility-oriented traits form a powerful value, characteristic of capitalist ideology, which Macpherson (1962) calls *possessive individualism*, asserting that it is desirable and legitimate for each person to pursue competitive success in the market. This goal has proven to be a strong force in shaping American schools. It has lured students away from the pursuit of civic virtue by offering them the chance to use schooling as a kind of *cultural currency* (Collins, 1979) that can be exchanged for social position and worldly success.

From the perspective of democratic equality, schools should make republicans; from the perspective of social efficiency, they should make workers; but from the perspective of social mobility, they should make winners. In the latter view, the individual sees schools as a mechanism for producing neither a democratic society nor a productive economy but a good job. The most salient outcome of attending school becomes the diploma, the usefulness of which derives from its ability to provide the owner with cultural advantage in the competition for positions of privilege within the social structure. In this sense then, social mobility is unique among the three goals in the way it has promoted the commodification of American education. For, while social efficiency has subordinated schooling to the human capital demands of the economy, giving educational primacy

to the vocational use-value of school learning, the social mobility goal has turned schooling into a cultural commodity, the value of which arises less from its intrinsic usefulness than from its exchangeability. School is worth pursuing, from this point of view, because its credentials can buy success. And the ability of these credentials to buy success is determined by the forces of supply and demand in the credentials market that mediates between schooling and the economy.

In conjunction with social efficiency, the other market-centered educational goal, social mobility has had the effect of radically narrowing the significance of citizenship training within American schools over the years. Once seen as the overarching goal of the entire educational effort, schooling for citizenship increasingly has been confined to one part of the curriculum (social studies) or even perhaps a single course (civics), while market-oriented practices have become more pervasive (Beyer, 1994; Katznelson & Weir, 1985). Citizenship training has become entombed in such denatured rituals as participating in the Martin Luther King Day assembly, studying the sanitized stories in the history textbook, and learning about the three branches of government. As a practical matter, what schools identify and reward as good citizenship in their students today is often just organizationally acceptable conduct—behaving in accordance with school rules rather than showing a predisposition toward civic virtue. This shift away from the common school vision of schools as “republican machines” appeared as early as the third quarter of the 19th century, when schools began to downgrade the significance of shaping student behavior by construing it as a way to promote organizational efficiency rather than a way to promote the character traits required for a democracy. Under growing pressure from a meritocratic (social-mobility based) vision of schooling, educators increasingly began to focus instead on fostering individual academic achievement.<sup>18</sup>

*Classroom learning.* Although the social efficiency goal directs student attention away from civic virtue and toward the needs of the economy, it nonetheless reinforces the salience of learning, even if it reduces the range of useful learning to the limits defined by vocational skill requirements. However, as suggested earlier, the social mobility goal effectively undermines the intrinsic value of any learning acquired in school. For if the ultimate utility of schooling for the individual educational consumer is to provide him or her with the credentials that open doors to good jobs, then the content of school learning is irrelevant. What matters is not real learning but what Sedlak and his co-authors (1986) call *surrogate learning*: “As long as the tests are passed, credits are accumulated, and credentials are awarded, what occurs in most classrooms is allowed to pass for education” (Sedlak et al., 1986, p. 183). The essence of schooling then becomes the accumulation of exchange values (grades, credits, and credentials) that can be cashed in for social status rather than the acquisition of use values (such as, the knowledge of algebra or the ability to participate in democratic governance), which provide capacities and resources that an individual can put directly into practice (Steinberg, 1996).

As noted earlier, neoclassical economics sees no tension between use value and exchange value, since the latter is assumed to reflect the former. Marx (1967), however, effectively challenged this assumption. In a capitalist society, he argued, the market abstracts social products from their original context and particular function, reifies this abstraction by making it into a generic commodity, and makes it equivalent to all other commodities by assigning it a monetary value.<sup>19</sup> This is as true of educational credentials as it is of any other social product, such as an agricultural crop, that is created in response to market demand (Goldman & Tickamyer, 1984). From this perspective, schooling for democracy or efficiency is like farming for subsistence. The purpose of the latter is to feed one's family or community; therefore the farmer has an incentive to plant the full range of crops required to sustain life. Schooling for mobility is like farming for the market. The purpose here is not to grow food but to produce widgets, a generic commodity that can be exchanged for money. Under these conditions, the farmer has an incentive to grow whatever crop will yield the best price on the market. The fact that the farmer's family members cannot live on soybeans or feed corn does not matter, since they use the money generated by their cash crop to buy what they need to live. Similarly, in schools that operate under a social mobility mandate, students and educators alike have little incentive to see learning as much more than an arbitrary mechanism for accumulating merit points that eventually add up to a diploma.

A large number of recent reports and studies point to the relatively low level of academic achievement registered by contemporary American students.<sup>20</sup> These writers explicitly or implicitly blame a wide variety of factors for this problem: undereducated and underskilled teachers; distracted, spoiled, and unmotivated students; an educational organization clogged with politics, bureaucracy, and unionism; and an unchallenging, watered-down curriculum. But I am suggesting that it is more valid to point the finger at a powerful purpose for schooling that is at core anti-educational. By structuring schooling around the goal of social mobility, Americans have succeeded in producing students who are well schooled and poorly educated. The system teaches them to master the forms and not the content.<sup>21</sup>

As Boudon (1974) has argued, the actors in this educational system are making rational choices. If the goal of schooling is credentials and the process of acquiring these credentials is arbitrary, then it is only rational for students to try to acquire the greatest exchange value for the smallest investment of time and energy. The result is what Sedlak et al. (1986) call *bargaining* and Powell et al. (1985) call *treaties*—where students seek to strike a good deal with the teacher (less work for a good grade) and the teacher has a weakened rationale for trying to hold them to high academic standards. As Sedlak and colleagues suggest, the essence of this marketplace behavior in schools is captured by a question that echoes through American classrooms: “Will this be on the test?” Under the bargain-basement educational conditions fostered by the pursuit of social mobility, whatever is not on the test is not worth learning, and whatever is on the test need only be

learned in the kind of superficial manner that is required to achieve a passing grade.

*Equal access.* The mobility and efficiency goals for education have pushed the common school goal of democratic equality into a corner of the American schoolroom. Citizenship has largely given way to self-interest and economic necessity, and equal treatment has succumbed to the powerful pressure (from both consumers and employers) for educational stratification. The only component of the political purposes of schooling that still exerts an undiminished influence on the schools is the ideal of equal access. The expansive political hopes of the common schoolmen over the years have become lodged in this part of the original dream. Yet the influence of this remaining hope on the schools has proven to be substantial, and this influence is perhaps most visible in the way it has undermined the effectiveness of schools at promoting either mobility or efficiency.

From the perspective of the mobility and efficiency goals, democratic pressure for equal access to schools has simply gotten out of hand. The problem is that, in a society that sees itself as devoted to political equality, it is politically impossible to contain the demand for schooling for very long. Equal access is compatible with either mobility or efficiency, as long as it is interpreted as providing an unlimited possibility for educational attainment combined with a limited probability of acquiring the highest levels of such attainment. Under these conditions, equal access education can still provide opportunity for mobility to a few individuals and can still fill the personpower needs of the pyramid-shaped occupational structure. But the continuing tradition of democratic equality interferes with this comfortable scheme of meritocratic achievement and human capital creation by making it appear hollow for society to offer people broad-based access only to those levels of education that are not associated with the better jobs.

In the late 19th century, when the experience of elementary schooling was shared by the many and high school was enjoyed by the few, a high school diploma was a ticket to a good position, and thus access to high school became a hot political issue. To keep high school attendance at a low level was a difficult policy to defend in democratic terms, since attendance at that level was precisely what made the notion of equal access socially meaningful. In the mid-20th century, the same political dilemma confronted policymakers; only this time, the target was the college. If high school was generic and college was special, then college credentials were the most valuable, and access to college became the focus of political attention. In both cases, the pressure for equal access translated into a demand not just for some form of education but for the level that was most salient for status attainment. And the most useful stratum of schooling for social mobility was that relatively rarefied stratum the credentials of which had the highest exchange value (Labaree, 1988, 1990).

This pressure for access to the most valuable educational credentials has resulted in the paradox that bedevils modern societies with formally meritocratic opportunity structures: Levels of educational attainment keep



rising, while levels of social mobility remain the same. Raymond Boudon's (1974) simple arithmetic model of educational opportunity and meritocratic status attainment demonstrates why this is so. Politically induced opportunities for higher level educational attainment have been growing faster than structurally induced opportunities for higher level status attainment; there are more diplomas than good jobs. The result is a stable rate of social mobility and a declining exchange value for educational credentials.

### **Conclusion: Contradiction, Credentialism, and Possibility**

Three purposes have shaped the history of American schooling—democratic equality, social mobility, and social efficiency. In this article, I have explored some of the ways that these purposes have exerted their separate effects on schools and also the ways that they have interacted over time. Sometimes the effects were additive. For example, mobility and efficiency both promoted educational stratification, and democracy and mobility both exerted pressure for open access. But in other ways, these purposes pushed schools in opposite directions. For example, democracy promoted commonality, while the other two promoted differentiation, and democracy and mobility stressed possibilities, while efficiency stressed limits. Altogether, these alternative goals have affected American education in a variety of ways, both negative and positive. On the negative side, they have led to internal contradiction and rampant credentialism, but, on the positive side, they have also provided workable mechanisms for combating these problems.

#### **Contradiction**

One obvious effect of the three goals has been to create within American education a structure that is contradictory and frequently counterproductive. In response to the various demands put on them, educational institutions are simultaneously moving in a variety of directions that are often in opposition to one another. For example, we systematically sort and select students according to individual merit and then undermine this through homogenizing practices such as grade inflation, social promotion, and whole-class instruction. We bring the entire array of social groups in a community together under one roof in a comprehensive regional high school and then make sure that each group has a distinctly different educational experience there. We offer everyone access to higher education (at the expense of admissions standards, academic rigor, and curriculum prerequisites), while assuring that the social benefits of this access are sharply stratified (at the expense of equal opportunity and social advancement). We focus on using education to prepare people for work (thus undercutting other conceptions of what it means to learn) but then devote most of our effort to providing a thoroughly general education that leaves most graduates unprepared to carry out work responsibilities without extensive on-the-job training. And so on.

As a result of being forced to muddle its goals and continually work at cross-purposes, education inevitably turns out to be deficient in carrying out any of these goals very effectively. Pushing harder for one goal (e.g., seeking to promote advanced opportunities for high achievers through development of a “gifted” program) only undercuts another (e.g., trying to promote equal learning opportunities for the handicapped through inclusive education). What looks like an educational improvement from one perspective seems like a decline from another. All of this pushing and pulling leaves educational institutions in a no-win situation, for, whichever way they move, they are goring someone’s ox. And wherever they choose to stand, they are in a hopelessly compromised situation in which they fulfill none of the three goals effectively. Instead, they must settle for a balancing act among competing pressures, an effort that satisfies no one and aims only to create the minimum conflict. So, if schools do not seem to work very well, one key reason is that we continue to ask them to achieve ends that are mutually exclusive.

### **Credentialism**

The primary medium through which Americans have expressed their peculiar mix of goals for schools—sometimes mutually reinforcing and sometimes contradictory—has been the market for educational credentials. This market, as Collins (1979) and Boudon (1974) suggest, is the mechanism that connects schooling and the economy, translating educational attainment into social attainment according to its own internal logic. The centrality of the credentials market derives from the key role played by the social mobility goal in the ideological development of American schooling. After all, in a school system that is determined primarily by the requirements of democratic equality, the problem of occupational placement is irrelevant, and thus the market valuation of educational credentials has little impact on the way schools work. Conversely, in a school system determined primarily by the demands of social efficiency, the problem of filling jobs is paramount, and thus the credentials market is wholly subordinate to the requirements of the occupational structure; under these restrictive conditions, schools produce the precise number of people with the appropriate skills for each of the existing job openings. In either case, the result would be that the credentials market exerts no independent effect on schools, and therefore inefficiencies such as credential inflation—which Boudon’s model predicts and American consumers experience—are simply impossible.

In the American setting, however, where the standoff between democracy and the market economy prevents the hegemony of either, social mobility emerges as an intriguing alternative goal for schools. Drawing from both poles of the American ideological spectrum and blurring the differences between these poles, this goal establishes the credentials market as a zone of individual enterprise, located between school and economy, where a few students with “merit” can make their way. In this zone, the dominion of social efficiency is relaxed, because here there is no one-to-one relationship

between school-acquired skills and jobs. Instead, this relationship is mediated by market forces of supply and demand. The salience of the credentials market creates a realm of possibilities for status attainment and elevates schooling into an instrument for achieving the American dream. Portraying the social structure as a structure of opportunity that can be negotiated by those with the most valuable credentials, the social mobility goal puts a democratic face on the inequalities of capitalism. Yet at the same time, this market preserves the probability of social stasis and social reproduction, because the likelihood of getting ahead is limited by the social structure's pyramid shape. Countering the pessimism inherent in the goal of social efficiency, the credentials market offers unlimited possibilities for status enhancement; countering the optimism embodied in the goal of democratic equality, this market provides for only one certainty, and that is the persistence of stratified outcomes.

If the social mobility goal holds the crucial middle ground between two opposing purposes for schools, then the credentials market holds the middle ground between two institutions (school and work) that reflect these crossed purposes. In spite of its involvement in the reproduction of inequality, education still represents the political hopes of Americans who see a higher purpose to social life than the achievement of social efficiency. As Carnoy and Levin (1985) have pointed out, schools continue to provide Americans with a social experience that is markedly more egalitarian and more open to free choice and possibilities of self-realization than anything that is available to them in the realm of work. The credentials market, then, necessarily becomes the place where the aspirations raised by education meet the cold reality of socioeconomic limits, where high educational attainment confronts the modest possibilities for status attainment.

The credentials market exists in a state of partial autonomy. Constrained by the institutions that bracket it, this market also exerts an independent impact on both of these institutions. Understanding the nature of the latter impact is crucial to an understanding of the relationship between school and society in the United States. As Collins (1979) and Boudon (1974) show, the inner logic of the credentials market is quite simple and rational: Educational opportunities grow faster than social opportunities; the ability of a particular diploma to buy a good job declines, so the value of educational credentials becomes inflated. I have tried to show how this outcome is the natural result of contradictory tendencies woven into the fabric of American life. I have also tried to show how this product of the credentials market has shaped both schools and the economy.<sup>22</sup>

Credential inflation affects schools by undermining the incentive for students to learn. The social mobility purpose has already reduced this incentive by making credentials a more important acquisition for students than knowledge and skills. But the devaluation of these credentials then makes it seem like a waste to expend even the minimal effort required to pursue surrogate learning and the acquisition of grades, credits, and diplomas. Credential inflation also affects the larger society. It promotes a futile

scramble for higher level credentials, which is very costly in terms of time and money and which produces little economic benefit. Yet, since the effect of putting a lid on this inflation would be to stifle opportunities for social mobility, there is unlikely to be the political will to implement this ultimate solution to the problem. Instead, the credentials market continues to carry on in a manner that is individually rational and collectively irrational, faithfully reflecting the contradictory purposes that Americans have loaded onto schools and society alike.

### **Possibility**

Conflicting goals for education can produce a contradictory and compromised structure for educational institutions that sharply impairs their effectiveness. They can also—through the medium of the consumer-driven mobility goal that plays such a key role in this compromised structure—lead to kind of credentialism that is strikingly counterproductive for both education and society. The fact that educational goals are in conflict, however, is not in itself an unmanageable problem. We cannot realistically escape from it by just choosing one goal and eliminating the others. Any healthy society needs an educational system that helps to produce good citizens, good workers, and good social opportunities. Preparing young people to enter into full involvement in a complex society is itself a complex task that necessarily requires educators to balance a variety of competing concerns, and the educational institutions that result from this effort necessarily are going to embody these tensions.

But I have argued in this article that the biggest problem facing American schools is not the conflict, contradiction, and compromise that arise from trying to keep a balance among educational goals. Instead, the main threat comes from the growing dominance of the social mobility goal over the others. Although this goal (in coalition with the democratic equality goal) has been a major factor in motivating a progressive politics of education over the years, the increasing hegemony of the mobility goal and its narrow consumer-based approach to education have led to the reconceptualization of education as a purely private good.

We are now, in the late 1990s, experiencing the sobering consequences of this ideological shift. We find credentialism triumphing over learning in our schools, with a commodified form of education winning an edge over useful substance. We find public schools under attack, not just because they are deemed ineffective but also because they are public. After all, if education is indeed a private good, then the next step (according to the influential right wing in today's educational politics) is to withdraw public control entirely and move toward a fully privatized system of education. Charter schools and consumer choice are the current icons. The word *public* itself is being transformed, as public schools are renamed *government* schools (with all the stigma that is carried by this term in an anti-government era), and private charter schools are being christened *public school academies* (the title accorded them by law in Michigan). Accordingly, the

government is asked to abdicate its role in educational matters, while the consumer is crowned king.

Fortunately, the long history of conflicting goals for American education prepares us for such a situation by providing us with countervailing values. These arise from our belief in the publicness of the public schools, a belief that is reinforced by both of the other goals that have competed with social mobility within our politics of education. Both the democratic equality tradition and the social efficiency tradition are inherently hostile to the growing effort to reduce public education to a private good. Neither is able to tolerate the social inequality and social inefficiency that are the collective consequences of this shift toward private control. Neither is willing to allow this important public function to be left up to the vagaries of the market in educational credentials. As a result, we can defend the public schools as a public good by drawing on the deeply rooted conceptions of education that arise from these traditions: the view that education should provide everyone with the capacities required for full political participation as informed citizens and the view that education should provide everyone with the capacities required for full economic participation as productive workers. Both of these public visions have become integrated into the structure of American education. They are exemplified in a wide range of daily educational practices, and they are so firmly fixed in our conception of school that it is difficult for most of us to imagine a form of education that is not shaped by them.

All of this provides us with a potent array of experiences, practices, arguments, and values that we can use in asserting the importance of education as a decidedly public institution. It enables us to show how the erstwhile privatizers are only the latest example of a long-standing effort to transform education into a consumer commodity and to demonstrate how this effort has already done considerable damage to both school and society—by undermining learning, reinforcing social stratification, and promoting a futile and wasteful race to attain devalued credentials. In short, the history of conflicting goals for American education has brought contradiction and debilitation. But it has also provided us with an open structure of education that is vulnerable to change, and it has given educators and citizens alike an alternative set of principles and practices that support the indivisibility of education as a public good.

### Notes

This article frames the argument for my forthcoming book—with the working title, *Degrees of Advantage: How Getting Ahead Interferes with Getting an Education*—which will be published by Yale University Press in the fall of 1997. An earlier version of the article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New York (1996); I am grateful to John Rury for his thoughtful and detailed comments as a critic at that meeting and to Kathleen Murphey for her helpful comments as chair of the session. I am also grateful to three anonymous reviewers who provided me with extraordinarily constructive and empathetic guidance in making revisions. In addition, I want to thank David Cohen and Cleo Cherryholmes for their comments on a very early version of this article. Finally, I am indebted to my students, in the College of

## *American Struggle Over Educational Goals*

Education at Michigan State University, with whom I have talked about these issues for years.

<sup>1</sup>Berliner and Biddle (1995) have written a cogent defense of public schools against a number of such accusations, drawing on a wide array of evidence to support this defense. In a similar vein, Gerald Bracey (1995) publishes annual reports in which he exposes the misinformation that underlies much of public education's bad press.

<sup>2</sup>A classic effort to summarize what research says about American education is the booklet *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, published by the U. S. Department of Education in 1986.

<sup>3</sup>A large number of scholars have seen this tension as central in understanding the history of American education. For example, see Hogan (1985), Katznelson and Weir (1985), Curti (1935/1959), Cohen and Neufeld (1981), Cohen (1984), Reese (1986), Labaree (1990), and Carnoy and Levin (1985).

<sup>4</sup>In my earlier thinking on this issue (Labaree, 1988), I defined these educational goals simply as *democratic politics* and *capitalist markets*. I am grateful to David Hogan (personal communication, October 15, 1988) for originally pointing out to me that the latter goal consists of two distinct and frequently contradictory market purposes, which I have chosen to identify as *social mobility* and *social efficiency*.

<sup>5</sup>Many scholars have written about the conflicting purposes embedded within American education, although they have defined and categorized these purposes in a variety of ways that differ from my own approach. In addition to the sources cited in Note 2, examples include: Tyack and Cuban (1995), Goodlad (1979, 1984), Boyer (1983, 1987), Fullan (1991, 1993), Paris (1995), Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), Apple (1982), Kozol (1991), Gutmann (1987), de Lone (1979), Cusick (1992), and Connell et al. (1982).

<sup>6</sup>The three goals that serve as the focus for this article do not encompass all of the goals that Americans have for their schools. There are a number of such additional purposes. Among other things, we ask schools to deliver medical and psychological services, to act as baby-sitters for children and warehouses for surplus adolescent workers, to promote esthetic awareness and physical conditioning, to serve as a community center and a municipal symbol, to foster personal empowerment and healthy social development, and to pursue many other goals as well. I choose to focus on the three goals spelled out here because these goals are particularly important in defining the way in which we talk about and act toward our schools. That is, they are more socially salient and more politically resonant than other educational goals. The reason for this, as I have suggested, is that these goals arise from the basic contradiction between political equality and social inequality that lies at the heart of the American experience.

<sup>7</sup>For strong statements of this vision of education, see Gutmann (1987), Barber (1992), Hirsch (1987), Welter (1962), and Meier (1995).

<sup>8</sup>This is not to say that everyone receives the *same* benefit. The social efficiency benefit of education is collective, in that everyone receives some payoff from increased productivity and economic growth, but those whom the educational system sorts out early and assigns to the lower social positions benefit markedly less than those who emerge later and end up in higher level positions. In short, social efficiency offers a trickle-down version of education as a public good.

<sup>9</sup>Neoclassical economics argues that the pursuit of individual ambition produces collective benefits to society through the guiding hand of the market. From this perspective, there is nothing socially dysfunctional about treating education as a private good for personal gain. My argument in this article, however, is that the educational and social consequences of this self-interested approach to education are in fact often (but not always) quite negative.

<sup>10</sup>A classic example is the University of Chicago, which decided in the 1980s that it might lose its appeal to consumers if it failed to charge as much as its competitors in the Ivy League. As a result, it nearly quadrupled annual tuition between 1980 and 1995, pushing charges to \$27,000 (Eng & Heller, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>I am racing quickly through complex territory here, in the process brushing past a number of significant distinctions. Credentialing theory (Berg, 1971; Collins, 1979), signaling theory (Spence, 1974), and labor queue theory (Thurrow, 1977) all take somewhat different positions on the question of how employers use credentials in the hiring process. (See Grubb, 1993, for a review of this literature.) For my purposes,

however, the key point is that for all these scholars the exchange value of educational credentials is not a simple reflection of their human capital content.

<sup>12</sup>I am using the word *political* in two senses in this article. In one sense, as used here, I argue that democratic equality is the most political of the goals because of its focus on mobilizing education to serve the needs of democracy. From this perspective, the other two goals in contrast focus on mobilizing education to meet the needs of the market. But in another sense, I argue that all three goals are elements of the politics of education, since they all represent political positions about the role that schools should play. From this perspective, social efficiency promotes the politics of human capital, and social mobility promotes the politics of pluralism (i.e., the competition among interest groups over relative shares of political power). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for help in sorting out this distinction.

<sup>13</sup>This brief historical sketch draws on work that is elaborated elsewhere: Labaree (1988, 1996) and Hogan (1987, 1990, 1992).

<sup>14</sup>Tyack and Cuban (1995) make a strong case for thinking about education change as occurring at these two levels—regular swings of policy talk and reform initiatives combined with underlying trends that are more evolutionary than cyclical in nature.

<sup>15</sup>I am grateful to Jay Featherstone and Steve Raudenbush for pointing out to me the powerful political role played by a progressive coalition based on both social mobility and democratic equality goals.

<sup>16</sup>I am arguing that American education fits this contest mobility model rather than what James Rosenbaum (1986) called a *tournament mobility* model. The former offers multiple re-entry possibilities, while the latter shuts down these possibilities by making it so that, at each decision point, one either advances to the next level or leaves the tournament altogether.

<sup>17</sup>I am grateful to a particularly generous anonymous reviewer for showing me how to define concisely the differences in the educational consequences of these two goals.

<sup>18</sup>One telling sign of this change was the move to end the practice of adjusting academic grades to align with a student's conduct. Harvard College and the Central High School of Philadelphia, to pick two examples, both eliminated this practice around 1860 (Labaree, 1988; Smallwood, 1935). Henceforth grades, the primary currency of reward within schools, would be pure measures of academic achievement, and conduct would be seen as a simple matter of controlling student behavior for the convenience of school operations.

<sup>19</sup>The classic essay on the subject is Marx's "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in the first volume of *Capital* (Marx, 1967).

<sup>20</sup>Different report writers have focused on different causes. The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986), Goodlad (1990, 1994), and the Holmes Group (1986, 1995) pointed to the structure of teaching and the quality of teacher education. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) and a wide range of subject-matter groups issuing proposals for national standards (e.g., National Center for History in the Schools, 1994; American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1990) blamed curriculum. A diverse group ranging from Sarason (1990) and Chubb and Moe (1990) to Goodlad (1984) and Boyer (1983) placed particular blame on the organization of schooling. Still others argued that the achievement deficiencies themselves were incorrect or overstated (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 1995).

<sup>21</sup>For more on this subject, see Steinberg (1996), Sedlak et al. (1986), Powell et al. (1985), Cusick (1983), Labaree (1988), and Meyer and Rowan (1983).

<sup>22</sup>There is modest but growing literature developing different components of what might become a theory of educational credentialing. Boudon (1974) and Collins (1979) explain the basic logic of a credentialist view of education. Dore (1976), Freeman (1976), Rumberger (1981), and Oxenham (1984) examine the scope of the problem credentialism poses and its economic consequences. Grubb and Lazerson (1982) explore the issue of how treating education like a private good affects education, particularly the way it undercuts the motivation for consumers to support the education of "other people's children." Brown (1995) reinforces Collins by showing how the expansion of American higher education occurred primarily in response to consumer demand for credentials rather than economic demand for useful skills. My own work explores the role of consumer demand and credentialism in shaping the history of high schools, colleges, and

## *American Struggle Over Educational Goals*

teachers' colleges (Labaree, 1988, 1990, 1995, 1996), while Hogan's focuses on the effect of credential markets on school organization, curriculum, and educational stratification (Hogan, 1987, 1990, 1992). Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) and Richardson et al. (1983) consider the impact of consumerism on student academic behavior in college; Steinberg (1996), Sedlak et al. (1986), and Powell et al. (1985) do the same for elementary and secondary schooling. Thurow's (1977) theory of the labor queue, Berg's (1971) work on business employment practices, and the related economic literature on job signaling (Spence, 1973, 1974) identify the function of credentials as tickets of access and signals of employability the value of which is independent of what is actually learned in school.

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