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Mirren Galway

University at Albany, State University of New York, mgalway@albany.edu

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# **The True Capabilities of American Education Policy**

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Political Science,  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Political Science  
and  
graduation from The Honors College

Mirren Galway

Research Advisor: Timothy Weaver, Ph.D.

May 2020

## Abstract

This paper is an analysis of today's American education system, how it has come to be, and why it seems to consistently fall behind when compared to other countries. Beginning with an evaluation of American education today, this paper follows the implementation of recent policy, the deep issues facing the education system and what can be done to address them. Specifically, it explores why, despite such bipartisan legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act, many students and teachers are still being left behind, and why common arguments about education policy continue to fail students. I argue that, although new legislation like a nationalized civics program could help our failing system improve programmatic priorities, we wrongly place blame on schools when the deepest limitations of the education system cannot be solved by education policy. They instead represent a broader issue of poverty in the United States and the failure of neoliberal ideology. I evaluate the social determinants of education and the factors that are currently holding many students from receiving opportunities available in schools, as well as promote a new way to view education on a national level. Stemming from a discussion of a Reagan-era report called *A Nation at Risk*, this paper explores how such failures in education require a meta-level discussion that asks whether the way American policymakers view competition and our global economy is truly beneficial to our students and society as a whole.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

A student sits in her classroom, pencil in hand, prepared to take her third-grade exam as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). She and her classmates have been preparing for weeks, learning about test taking strategies and what to expect, how to not be too stressed but just stressed enough to complete all the questions on time. She loves her teacher, he's nice and helpful and he really cares about her and her classmates. She knows she's supposed to do well, but what she does not know is that this test will dictate whether or not some of her teachers will lose their jobs.

What she does not know, is that her school has been deemed in need of "school improvement" by the NCLB and so to avoid the potential for future sanctions under the act, the administration and teachers at her school have been scrambling to provide new trainings for teachers, establish a new curriculum plan, and develop new after school programs for the advancement of each student. What she does not know is that these scores today will dictate whether her school reaches its "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP). In 2010, 38% of schools were not reaching these guidelines and many states would see schools' "failure" rates of over 50% (Klein, 2015). If they fail today, they will be on the road towards sanctions that could mean restructuring of the entire school and major shifts in staff.

What she does know is that she is not feeling great today and was sick last week when they were going over the math problem she now stares at. She does know her friend who doesn't learn as quickly as she does is taking the test in another room and he has been really scared to take this test. She also knows her other friend has been sad lately because her dad is really sick, and her friend in the next classroom over has to eat breakfast and lunch at school every day

because he says he doesn't have enough at home. These students may fail this test today, and not because of tangible things the school can control. When they fail, the school will be forced to face sanctions defined by the No Child Left Behind Act for 'failing schools,' and none of the challenges this little girl and her friends are facing will be alleviated.

**This Paper:**

This paper is an analysis of today's American education system, how it has come to be, and why it seems to consistently fall behind when compared to other countries. Specifically, it explores why, despite such bipartisan legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act, many students and teachers are still being left behind. I argue that, although some new legislation could help our failing system improve programmatic priorities, the deepest limitations of the American education system cannot be solved by education policy. They instead represent a broader issue of poverty in the United States and the failure of a neoliberal ideology in education. Stemming from a discussion of a Reagan-era report called *A Nation at Risk*, this paper explores how the failures of the American educational system require a meta-level discussion that asks whether the way American policymakers view competition and our global economy is truly beneficial to our students and society as a whole.

## **The Current State of the American Education System**

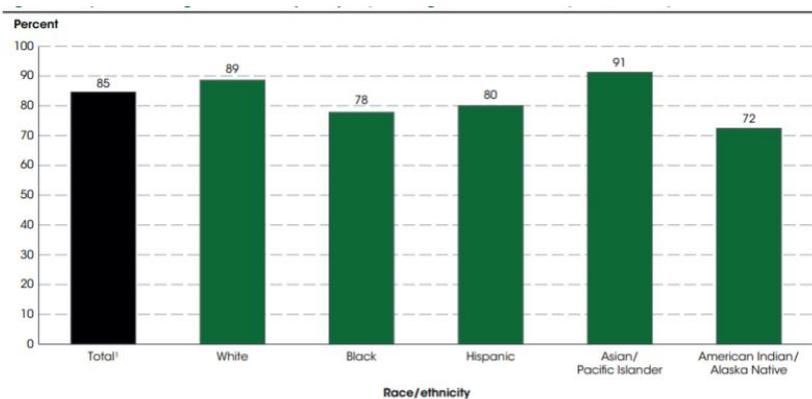
Under Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was introduced to establish a role for the federal government in public education policy. It was the first sweeping form of education policy for the United States and for the first time set aid aside specifically to support the education of disadvantaged students. Since 1965, the ESEA has been reauthorized, changed, and reworked more than six different times, the biggest change being the No Child Left Behind act under George W. Bush (Klein, 2015). The past 100 years have shown vast changes in American education policy and yet our results over time have remained stagnant and behind the rest of the world. Disparities within graduation rates, high levels of poverty within urban schools, low academic performance, high rates of absenteeism and low rates of post-secondary graduation show that many concerns about the American education system remain and demand attention as policy continues to change. Policy has responded to concern and fear over America's mediocre performance compared to other nations as we fall in the middle of the pack compared to countries all over the world in science, math and reading scores (Desilver, 2017). These concerns show that although much bipartisan legislation has been passed since 1965, America has yet to solve some of its most pressing issues in education which keep it from performing competitively and equitably on a global scale.

### **Graduation Rates:**

First recorded nation-wide in 2010, the graduation rate has since become a key indicator of public education success in America. Completing the K-12 process is an accomplishment in itself. Currently, with a graduation rate of 85% for public high school students, we are seeing our highest rates yet (McFarland et al., 2019). This had been a steady increase of 6% since the

2010/11 school year. Yet, despite raising graduation rates, there are clear gaps in performance between different groups (McFarland et al., 2019). As can be seen in figure one, when broken down by race, Asian/Pacific Islander students have the highest Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), of 91% and American Indian/Alaska Native Students graduate at just 72%. This variation can reach as high as 26% between black and white students in some states, and 22% gaps between Hispanic and white students in others (McFarland et al., 2019). Although this indicates that the majority of students in America are graduating high school, this rate varies greatly by rural, suburban and urban schools as well as by race and socioeconomic status. In 2009, the average high school graduation rate among the largest 50 cities in America was 53% compared to a suburban rate closer to 71% (Dillon, 2009) These disparities, as well as the slow growth in graduation rate across the board, begin to highlight some of the many concerns this country should see with the American public education system.

Figure 1: Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for Public High School Students by Race/Ethnicity: 2016-17



<sup>1</sup> Includes other race/ethnicity categories not separately shown.  
 NOTE: The ACGR is the percentage of public high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma within 4 years of starting ninth grade. The Bureau of Indian Education and Puerto Rico are not included in the U.S. average ACGR. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Consolidated State Performance Report, 2016-17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 219.46.

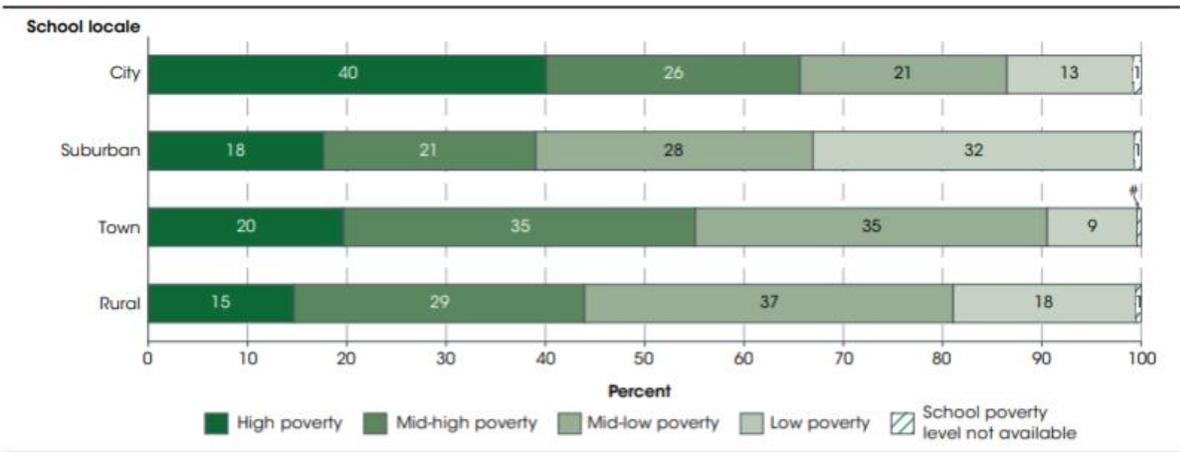
Whether a student graduates from high school or drops out before completion is based on a wide range of factors. Self-reported reasons include a general dislike for school, failing courses, or difficulty getting along with teachers or other classmates. Other reported reasons

have to do with family matters, whether they are now having a child or must take a job to support their families financially. Others may be caring for a sick parent or sibling or may have a long-term illness or disability themselves. More often than not, students are not randomly choosing to drop out of school because they feel like it. It is not a snap decision made in a day; it is the final step in a process which began when they were young, heightened by personal factors, low performance, a lack of interior or exterior support systems, and a general sense of feeling stuck in a system that does not allow them to succeed (Melville, 2006).

### **School Poverty Levels:**

Many schools lack the financial and physical resources to solve the problems facing students on the path to graduation and success. In the fall of 2016, 45% of Hispanic students, and 44% of Black students, attended high-poverty schools (McFarland et al., 2019). High poverty schools are defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as schools where more than 75% of students qualify for free and reduced lunches (McFarland et al., 2019). As shown in figure 2, 40% of city schools as of 2016 were considered high poverty schools whereas only 18% of suburban schools were (McFarland et al., 2019). Schools in these areas have limited access to physical and financial resources and students within them have limited access to supplemental education resources. Currently, the percentage of students aged 3-18 without access to the internet, where a substantial amount of learning is now done, is 14% (McFarland et al., 2019).

Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Public-School Students, for Each School Locale, by School Poverty Level: Fall 2016



# Rounds to zero.  
 NOTE: High-poverty schools are defined as public schools where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-high poverty schools are those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; and low-poverty schools are those where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for FRPL. "School poverty level not available" includes schools for which information on FRPL is missing and schools that did not participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Data include students whose NSLP eligibility has been determined through direct certification. For more information on eligibility for FRPL and its relationship to poverty, see the NCES blog post "Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?" Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2016-17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 216.60.

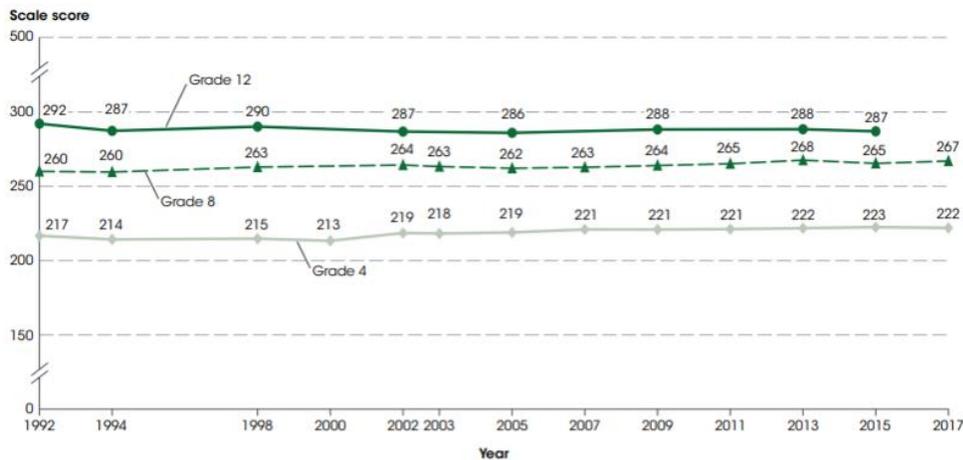
In schools where a majority of their students qualify for free and reduced lunches and experience deep poverty, teachers and administration are delivering as both educational development and general support to students in need. Through free and reduced lunches, districts can provide needy students with the necessary food to stay full throughout a school day, but they can do little to alleviate the effects of poverty on a child's life when they are outside the walls of the school. Children growing up in poverty experience proven long-term effects in health and education in terms of general brain development, behavior, low levels of self-confidence, learned helplessness and high levels of stress, all of which can impact a student's performance in school and ability to graduate (Boghani, 2017). This is an issue that education alone cannot alleviate, yet education policy, specifically the No Child Left Behind Act implemented in 2001, focuses heavily on holding teachers and administrators primarily responsible for low achieving students (Klein, 2015). Although administrators and teachers dictate some control over the environment

that students experience in school, they do not have control over the adverse living environments that they may experience at home.

### Testing Proficiency:

Performance in testing of school aged students has shown little improvement since 1992, shown below in figure 3. In reading, the average 4th grade score of 2017 was higher than the average score in 1992, but not different since 2015 (McFarland et al., 2019). Similar results can be seen for 8th and 12th grade students in reading as well as in math and science. Although some improvements have been made, average scores remain low comparatively to other countries, and growth remains sluggish. This issue also represents disparities between suburban and urban schools as well as race, where suburban schools have higher test results compared to urban schools and white students outperform black students within testing (McFarland et al., 2019).

Figure 3: Average National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Scale Scores of 4th-, 9th-, and 12th-grade Students: Selected Years, 1992-2017

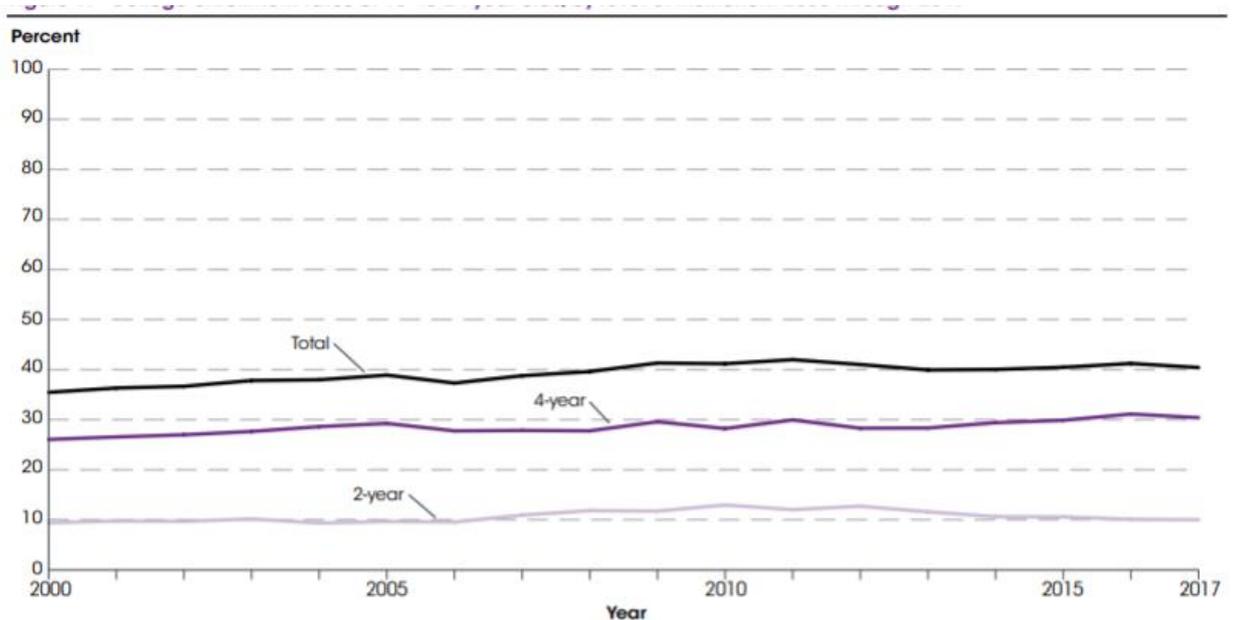


NOTE: Includes public and private schools. The reading scale scores range from 0 to 500. Assessment was not conducted for grade 8 in 2000 or for grade 12 in 2000, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2017. Testing accommodations (e.g., extended time, small group testing) for children with disabilities and English language learners were not permitted in 1992 and 1994.  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), selected years, 1992-2017 Reading Assessments, NAEP Data Explorer. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, table 221.10.

## Higher Education:

Currently, the majority of 25-29-year olds have completed High School or more school, but only 36% have a bachelor's degree or higher as can be seen in figure 4 (McFarland et al., 2019). Just 9% have a master's degree or higher. This is further broken down by 44% of white 25-29-year olds with a bachelor's degree or higher compared with just 23% of black 25-29-year olds (McFarland et al., 2019). The difference between the median annual earnings for 25-34-year olds of someone who has completed high school and those that have completed a master's degree is \$39,000 per year (McFarland et al., 2019). This goes to show the importance of not only graduating high school, but of attending some form of secondary education in economic success for students. Whether these students go on to college is impacted largely by socioeconomic status. The percentage of those enrolled in postsecondary education 7 years after being in 9th grade was 50% larger for students with higher socioeconomic standing than for those lower (McFarland et al., 2019).

Figure 4: College Enrollment Rates of 18- to 24-year-olds, by level of institution: 2000 through 2017



NOTE: Data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 2000 through 2017. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 302.60.

**Absenteeism:**

An often-overlooked issue facing the American education system is chronic absenteeism. When a student misses any amount of school it can make following along in class difficult, but when they miss at least 15 days of a school year, they are at high risk for falling behind; experiencing more difficulty learning content at the pace of other students and performing worse than their peers on assessments (United States Department of Education, 2016). Between 2015 and 2016, about 1 in 6 students suffered from chronic absenteeism. This issue is magnified by race as well, with 20.5% of black students and 26% of American Indian students missing at least 15 days in a year. This is a prevalent issue across the country, with about 800 school districts reaching rates of chronic absenteeism of above 30% of students (United States Department of Education, 2016). Reasons for chronic absenteeism can range from student illness, lack of transportation, discouragement and frustration in school, or fear of safety, each of which are often more acute in disadvantaged areas with high crime rates, poor infrastructure, and limited access to health care. Students that are chronically absent in early education are more likely to miss early learning milestones and can lead to higher dropout rates and negative long term impacts on adulthood including poverty, overall health, and increased involvement with the criminal justice system (United States Department of Education, 2016).

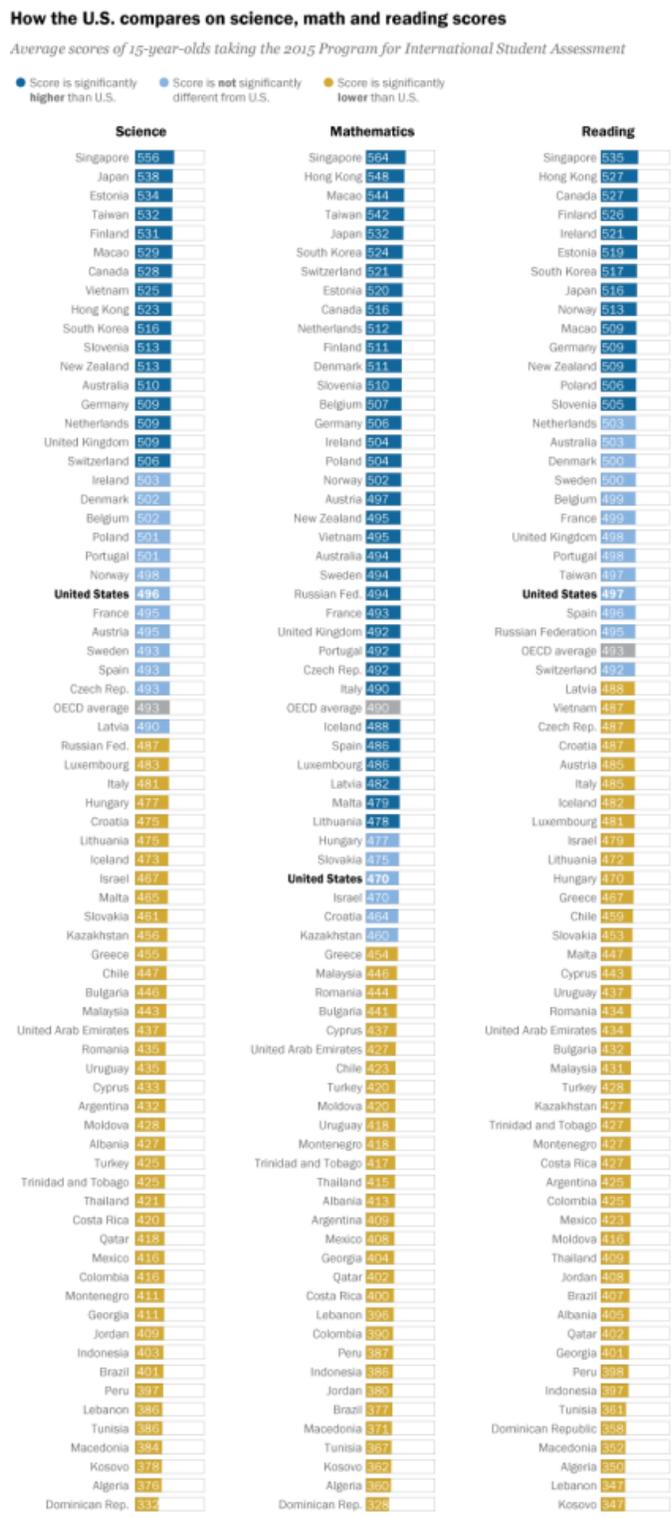
## The No Child Left Behind Act

### The Problem:

In order to solve the issue of why American City Schools perpetuate a cycle of “underperformance” according to national guidelines, we must first identify what significant issues these schools are facing. After identifying the problems with public schools in America, we can then identify which, if any, of these issues are solvable strictly by education policy. The No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001 with broad bi-partisan support as an initiative to make American schools and students more competitive among the rest of the world and provide support to underserved groups which have shown historic trends of underperformance. Today, the United States still remains in the “middle of the pack” of other OECD countries in science, math and reading, as shown in figure 5. Although graduation rates across the country have been steadily increasing over time, and gaps in success among certain groups of students have begun to lessen, broad federal policy change like the No Child Left Behind Act has left America’s education with many holes and still far out of reach of top performing countries. Following concerns laid out in *A Nation at Risk* under the Reagan administration, the central ideology highlighted in the No Child Left Behind Act revolves around competition among schools to encourage performance enhancement. Under Reagan, there was widespread concern about competing within the global community. *A Nation at Risk* outlines the problem saying “we live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). It goes on to explain that while the United States was once in a secure position within this global community “it is no longer” (The National Commission on Excellence in

Education, 1983). Based on this standard of international competition as an indicator of the nation's success, education policy stemmed from a need to improve the nation's standing. President G.W. Bush took on the torch of competition on the world stage when he introduced the No Child Left Behind act, explaining that "we'd never be able to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century unless we have an education system that doesn't quit on children, an education system that raises standards, an education that makes sure there's excellence in every classroom" (George W. Bush, 2004). This competition has since been driven by data collection of standardized test scores, market-driven reforms like school choice and school vouchers, and accountability systems based in punishment and sanctions (Mitchem, 2011). The tools given to schools deemed "failing," included tutoring services and free choice of schools for parents. These tools have left families uninspired as the percentage of students leaving failing schools through school choice hovered around 1%, and over 80% of students in failing schools refused or showed no interest in tutoring programs (Ravitch, 2016). This push for viewing education as a marketplace has schools focused more on competition than fueling the minds of a future generation and encouraging collaboration. It is important to evaluate how America found itself at the No Child Left Behind Act and whether its underlying ideology should inform the methodology we continue to use to improve the American education system.

Figure 5: US Scores in Science, Mathematics and Reading Compared to other OECD Countries



Note: Scale ranges from 0-1,000. Results from China not included because only four provinces participated in PISA 2015. Source: OECD, PISA 2015

## **Foundations in A Nation at Risk:**

In 1983, a document was released which placed blame on the American education system as a major contributor to America's inability to compete in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation on a global stage. *A Nation at Risk* was the result of the 1983 report completed by Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report provided a bleak view of American Education and its seemingly inevitable sweeping impact on American success globally. It likened American failure in education to a metaphorical act of war on the nation, and highlighted that "a high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This declaration, which undeniably placed education at the forefront of America's global failures, marked a distinct shift in discourse surrounding American education policy and set in motion a new rhetoric of accountability and prioritization of fixing schools. *A Nation at Risk* identified the perception of a broken promise between educators and students which had once ensured preparation for employment and successful participation in the economy (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Now, it seemed, within a globalized community, students were no longer able to compete. This act thus defined education as a major cause of American failure globally and defined the essential goal of education as a way of preparing students for the changing economy to earn money in a capitalist society. Establishing both the main objective of American education and its main failure so explicitly, *A Nation at Risk* became an important representation of the direction of American education policy for decades to come, which would soon be seen with the bipartisan passage of the No Child Left Behind Act.

The education report, while setting a new foundation for American education policy, also aligned rhetoric surrounding education with the discourse surrounding the welfare state under the Reagan presidency. *A Nation at Risk* identified the need for education to produce citizens that would live independently and productively within American society. It identified explicitly that “history is not kind to idlers,” continuing that, “we live among determined, well-educated and strongly motivated competitors” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). With this identification of what productive citizens would look like, parallels can be drawn to the Reagan administration’s thoughts on welfare. With welfare reform came the definition of the “Welfare Queen,” an individual that took advantage of the American welfare system in order to avoid work and profit off of hard-working Americans (Black & Sprague, 2016). This characterization was based on ever-growing suspicion of people on welfare as individuals not fulfilling ideals of individualism, and hard work to improve the quality of society (Black & Sprague, 2016), both streams of policy discourse rejected the idea of idling citizens and placed value on working in order to be deemed valuable citizens. These linked ideologies, based in neoliberal global trends focusing on the value of the free market, would lay the framework for how we view education today and the direction of the No Child Left Behind Act.

*A Nation at Risk*, in addition to laying out the administrations education concerns and paralleling its thoughts on the welfare state, also highlighted the economic priorities of the time. The document begins by saying “Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). By starting this way, it is made clear that the nation’s main focus is on global economic dominance via competition in the biggest markets of the time. The report then goes on to say that “if only to

keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets; we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all..." (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), thus linking the importance of market competitiveness with education. These economic goals generally reflect the neoliberal economic ideals of the time. Peaking in the 1980s, the decline of a Keynesian consensus in economics followed a stretch of minimal economic growth, inflation, high unemployment, and low productivity (Eckes, 2015, p. 14). Keynesian economics became connected to stagflation, and in the United States, was thus rejected by newly elected President Reagan. Reagan, along with international leaders like England's Margaret Thatcher, economists and business leaders believed that reviving the free market would help the economy recover (Eckes, 2015, p. 14). This meant lower taxes, deregulation, and a focus on competition to keep the market free and accessible (Eckes, 2015, p. 14). The neoliberal economic ideology began to flow into many aspects of life beyond the economy however as shown in *A Nation at Risk*, where competition was applied to the education system. Education became a new market to produce students prepared for a global economy, and this ideology continued to flow through new education policy for decades to come.

### **Passage of the NCLB Act:**

Growing out of concern that the American education system was not internationally competitive as outlined in *A Nation at Risk*, the No Child Left Behind Act was born to increase the role of the federal government to hold schools responsible for the academic improvement of students across the country (Klein, 2015). It specifically focused on accountability systems for teachers and school districts to improve performance of historically underperforming and

underserved groups of students. This included special education students, poor and minority students, and English-language learners (Klein, 2015). These groups had continually performed behind other groups and seemed to require special consideration under new legislation. The law was not contractual for states, but if they did not comply, they risked losing federal aid and falling behind the rest of the nation (Klein, 2015).

NCLB was bipartisan in nature. It appealed both to conservatives through lenses of accountability, competition, and American greatness, while also to liberals looking to close achievement gaps among struggling groups and increase federal government control of education (Klein, 2015). Politically, the act was also popular among both democrats and republicans of the time in keeping with the globalized and market-friendly neoliberal ideology of the time. NCLB also saw collaboration between civil rights and business groups and had widespread public support drawing from growing concern over the failures of the current education system. The act seemed productive and widely supported, passing in the senate with a vote of 91 yeas and 8 nays (The No Child Left Behind Act, 2001) and was eventually signed into law in 2002 by George W. Bush.

Under the act, states were now expected to test students in reading and math from grades three to eight and again one time in high school and then release the results. This was a way to raise students to a state-decided proficiency level by 2013 (Klein, 2015). Schools were put on tracks to achieve their goals through “adequate yearly progress” or AYP, goals (Klein, 2015). If schools did not reach their AYP, they were subject to increasingly aggressive sanctions meant to hold teachers and schools accountable for not providing adequate improvement (Klein, 2015).

### **The “NCLB Toolkit”:**

For schools deemed “failing” by the NCLB act, or schools with the inability to reach their adequate yearly progress goals set by the policy, there were sanctions in place to ensure accountability. Under the law, if the AYP mark was missed two years in a row, the school would have to allow students to transfer to other schools within the district (Klein, 2015). If they missed three years in a row, the school would have to offer free tutoring services (Klein, 2015). If they continued to miss the mark on standardized tests, the school could face state intervention or complete restructuring (Klein, 2015). This toolkit was provided to ensure that families would have choices if their schools were failing to meet expectations. These programs however, immediately showed problems.

Diane Ravitch, initially a staunch supporter and developer of No Child Left Behind, changed her tune when she learned that the toolkit that had been established was proving consistently unsuccessful. She had initially claimed “we should thank President George W. Bush and Congress for passing the No Child Left Behind Act... All this attention and focus is paying off for younger students, who are reading and solving mathematics problems better than their parents’ generation” (Inskeep, 2010). Four years later, after reading and following the initial reports on the policy, she found that the sanctions and punishment measures were failing to improve schools and proving truly ineffective (Inskeep, 2010). These sanctions were instead divisive, punitive, or simply unproductive and unused.

Most students were not taking advantage of their right to transfer schools. In California, less than 1% of students in “failing” schools asked to transfer, in Colorado, it was less than 2%, and in Michigan the number was negligible (Ravitch, 2010). In many districts, only one school

was available at each grade level or urban schools would not have enough spaces available for students to transfer into. Thus, there were both logistic issues and the individual mentality involved with parents not wanting to move their children around after being established in a specific school or district (Ravitch, 2010). Many did not see it as convenient to transfer schools, even if they were offered free transportation and promises of a better school. Many were comfortable with their school and teachers, and others did not agree that their school was failing as many would only fail to reach AYP because one determined subgroup, often special needs children, would not make progress under the guidelines (Ravitch, 2010). Finally, many families wanted to see their schools improve rather than simply leave them after a year of not reaching federally defined guidelines (Ravitch, 2010).

The tutoring sanction, or Supplemental Education Services, did not fare much better as no more than 20% of students in any state with failing schools received tutoring (Ravitch, 2010). The law had created a voucher program for tutoring companies in order to establish a market for companies and schools to compete for students. Any organization could register to provide tutoring, and this established a volatile environment where tutoring agencies blamed districts for not allowing them the necessary space in schools, while public schools blamed tutoring agencies demanding space necessary for extracurricular activities already established for schools (Inskeep, 2010). This made it hard to find and maintain tutors and to spark interest among already underperforming students to stay at school for longer periods of time. Schools would also tend to shy away from complete restructuring as a worst-case sanction because they lacked the financial resources to start from scratch.

The “tool-kit” initially established to hold schools and teachers responsible for their schools missing established marks, was simply ineffective in solving the underlying issues facing

schools. The policy was punitive- establishing punishments and sanctions and threatening to strip funding and coupling these with ineffective solutions. Parents and students responded poorly to school choice options, tutoring became competitive and volatile, and restructuring seemed impossible. Oftentimes a school can train teachers, and encourage productive test strategies, and follow guidelines as closely as they want to, but if there are elements beyond their control, students are still going to fail and the sanctions will often be ineffective in helping them reach their marks (Ravitch, 2010).

### **Funding under NCLB:**

Included in the No Child Left Behind Act, is Title 1; “the section of the law providing federal funding to school districts to educate disadvantaged children” (Klein, 2015). This was initially established under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 but was expanded and reauthorized in NCLB. This money was promised through federal funding and could be taken away as a sanction if schools did not meet their adequate yearly progress goals. By fiscal year 2007, annual funding for this program was supposed to rise to \$25 billion (Klein, 2015), and yet it never reached this level. In fiscal year 2015, funding for the title 1 initiative was at only \$14.5 billion (Klein, 2015). This funding, meant to aid the neediest children in schools, was never evenly distributed, weakening schools’ abilities to reach adequate progress. When they did not meet these goals, schools were then stripped of more aid, thus establishing a cycle of underperformance in schools that left them without the tools to escape. This funding could have been beneficial in use to alleviate many of the difficulties keeping students from their ability to focus on their education, but the act instead left these students without.

Today, in the United States, just 8% of funding for public schools comes from the federal government (McFarland et al., 2019). Most financial resources for each school district come from local funds coupled with state support. Nearly half of these funds come from local property taxes thus establishing huge variation between districts in wealthy and impoverished areas (McFarland et al., 2019). These inequalities exist between regions of the country, states, cities, and even within districts. There are two schools of thought regarding the importance of school funding. Some argue that expenditures are not systematically related to student achievement, while others argue that school resources are systematically related to student achievement and that this relationship is educationally important (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Many politicians, including Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, argue that increasing funding does not impact outcomes, citing the increased local, state, and federal funding over the last thirty years and the lack of improved outcomes (Burnette, 2019). Researchers recently however, have begun indicating that while there is limited short term impact on test scores of extra funding in schools, in the long term, changes in spending can improve test scores, graduation and earnings (Dynarski, 2017) Despite varying opinions, it is clear that there are stark differences in funding for students in impoverished and wealthy areas and federal funding plays only a very small role in reducing these disparities. Although growth in funding and resources is often a major aspect of education policy, there is no definitive proof that simply raising dollars per student improves graduation or success rate among children. Resources are an important part of this conversation, as students with limited access to resources have a more limited educational experience, but strictly raising funds to give to these struggling schools has not proven worth the effort, and is often not followed through on, again proven in NCLB.

## **Curriculum Under NCLB:**

Critics of the No Child Left Behind act express concern over test-based education. Under federal guidelines, schools are required to test in reading and math from third to eighth grade and again in high school (Klein, 2015). Such heavy reliance on standardized tests have been critiqued for causing test anxiety among students, a school culture focused entirely on tests, and “teaching to the test” techniques among teachers as many argue that curriculum has narrowed as only math and reading are being tested (Musoleno, 2010). Opponents thus argue that many other subjects which are not explicitly tested such as social studies, foreign language and the arts are never prioritized as teachers work to prepare their students for tests that they must make progress on each year (Klein, 2015). Reliance on test-based measures of success shows a departure from the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Schools Movement which dominated education goals before NCLB. Under the 21<sup>st</sup> Century model, success was measured through completing complex projects, performances, portfolios and scoring rubrics to indicate competence on an individual level. Under NCLB, success became singularly defined by achievement on standardized test scores (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

Since accountability of teachers controls assessment of classroom and school performance, teachers feel pressure to raise test scores, especially in struggling urban districts. This results in teaching only skills that will be tested and neglecting more complex aspects of the subject and reducing instructional time on subjects not required by the act (Musoleno, 2010). It has also been noted that schools in dire need of raising test scores to meet adequate yearly progress goals may focus on strategies that result in short-term memory of skills but do not promote long term affirmation of the knowledge (Musoleno, 2010). Still others, it has been observed, will cheat for students on tests in order to raise scores and will reshape instructional

activities that they know to work in order to mirror standardized testing (Musoleno, 2010). In the 2010 through 2012 school years, the Government Accountability Office confirmed reports of 33 states with evidence of cheating on at least one standardized test (GAO, 2013). Famously, in 2014 in Atlanta Public Schools, twelve educators were accused of cheating on state tests by raising the scores of their students in order to present stronger yearly progress (Kamenetz, 2014). This case brought national attention to the issue of teachers influence testing to meet the demands of high stakes testing (Kamenetz, 2014). These issues have resulted in a deep restructuring of curriculum in schools to focus almost entirely on the subjects covered on the test and has created an environment of stress and worry while insulating the opportunity for cheating or rule bending by staff in an attempt to save their students and their jobs.

The environment of high stakes testing can effectively be described as “The Testing Industrial Complex” (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2015). This comparison to the prison industrial complex draws parallels between the use of surveillance and policing to promote punitive initiatives to solve issues which are actually rooted in other political concerns, along with a goal of privatization and promoting profits for corporations and finally its deep institutionalization over the last few decades which make it difficult or nearly impossible to dismantle (Croft et al., 2015). These high stakes, high stress environments which drive continued policy initiatives, result in stress within students manifesting as loss of sleep and illness, school closures in failing areas, and mass job loss as results on tests determine all success and failure of schools. Despite the culmination of a decade of proof that such testing does not produce its intended results, policy continues to promote test-taking as the best measure for success (Croft et al., 2015).

## Education as a Market Place

The No Child Left Behind Act passed with bipartisan support in the legislature and strong national support. At the time of its passage, it seemed like a huge accomplishment for education policy nationally and was supposed to focus on the needs of students that had been long overlooked. By creating competition and establishing strict rules of accountability while focusing on choice and flexibility, it seemed like the perfect solution. As former Assistant Secretary of Education, Diane Ravitch first expressed strong support of the bill, claiming that the attention being paid to young students was going to result in huge payoffs for the country long term (Inskeep, 2010). Years into its enforcement however, glaring issues arose and Ravitch, a once staunch supporter of the bill changed her position, now discussing its failures as a policy and ideology (Inskeep, 2010).

In her book, *The Death and the Life of the American Education System*, Ravitch explained that schools became too hyper-focused on achieving high test scores. In order to receive funding and resources, they had to compete with other schools and their performance (Ravitch, 2010). Resources were often given out based on this academic performance which established what she describes as an “education marketplace” (Ravitch, 2010). This implies that in order to receive capital, the school was expected to provide some quantifiable good. This in theory sounds positive; expecting schools to provide education to the best of its ability. But the issue, as Ravitch came to realize, is the feeling of competition that this placed on schools and their administrators (Ravitch, 2010). Additionally, in response to low-performing schools, George W. Bush had recommended that charter schools be used as a solution. Not only did charter schools lack quantitative evidence of effectiveness, but Ravitch said that “as the charter movement evolves, it creates legitimacy for the idea that schooling should be a free-market

choice, rather than a public responsibility” (Charter Schools, 2013). She went on to explain that placing schooling into the market economy holds high risks which she quickly saw play out in schools across the country. Schools began trying to out-score each other and would use varying ways to accomplish acceptable scores. Instead of raising standards within schools, Ravitch found that many were finding ways to evade the system by lowering standards so that more students would pass, and schools would do everything in their power to avoid sanctions and punishment (Ravitch, 2010). For example in 2010, after almost a decade after the implementation of NCLB, states claimed to have 80-90 percent of students proficient in reading and math, but on national tests like the National Assessment of Educational Progress, those same students would only have about 25-30 percent proficiency, showing inconsistencies and inflation of progress (Ravitch, 2010). After years of working to develop this policy, Ravitch now believes that schools should instead operate more on the basis of collaboration and community (Ravitch, 2010). The goal should not be to boast success in an attempt to out-do other schools, it should be to share in success with others to promote learning and community engagement for students. The NCLB Act, as Ravitch found, did the opposite.

As described above, “A Nation at Risk” implied that effective citizens would be educated to compete in a globalized world centered around capitalism (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This idea laid a foundation for viewing education as a marketplace. It was only natural then, that the No Child Left Behind Act would follow this mentality and place the schools themselves in competition with each other. Success in the global market meant competing with others, so this thought process was applied to schools, despite the lack of clear connection between competition and teaching standards in schools. Ravitch discovered that this competitive mentality was causing negative attitudes and an environment

conducive to cheating and evading rather than fueling a community of child development and the production of citizens (Ravitch, 2010). This mentality, at first so bipartisan in nature and widely supported, became controversial and showed clear parallels to common rhetoric about the economy, welfare, and globalization.

Ravitch soon discovered that No Child Left Behind had employed the same initiatives as private companies had to compete in the global marketplace. Private companies focused their priorities on bottom-line profits (Ravitch, 2010). Sanctions thus followed if individuals or sections of the company were not contributing to profits. These market based mechanisms cannot work within education unless the view is that schools work as private companies, which shifts the mentality of public education from community development of citizens, to for-profit corporations with a goal of competition rather than what it is producing and its effect on society. No Child Left Behind was certainly supporting the economy as tutoring and testing services drew billions of dollars in profits and became a substantial industry as they serviced schools attempting to achieve their yearly marks (Ravitch, 2010), however the students themselves were not being serviced and their interests were left far behind while private companies surged.

### **Shifting Control:**

In addition to underlying ideologies, NCLB toolkits and sanctions, ineffective funding, and established environments of competition and inevitable failure, the No Child Left Behind Act essentially placed both the federal government and the states in positions they were not prepared for. The federal government had taken on the job of establishing remedies for low-performing schools and using them as blanket solutions to problems that they did not fully understand. Additionally, the states were put in charge of establishing standards for their own

progress, leading to inflation of results and 50 varying standards which were difficult to compare (Klein, 2015). States had the power to completely define proficiency and show their progress in terms of their own established standards. This form of self-accountability of states and resulted in widespread confusion among schools. Confusion was coupled with ineffective and sweeping tutoring and schools choice solutions established by the federal government that had no real proof of success, showing an ineffective implementation of the act (Ravitch, 2010).

Diane Ravitch argued, after following reports about the effectiveness and implementation of the act, that future policy switches roles set out in *No Child Left Behind* (2010). She believes that if the federal government was employed to gather and release consistent and reliable information about progress from each state, while states were expected to work on solutions for schools that would be adaptable to their more localized and unique needs, much of the confusion and inconsistency could be mitigated.

### **NCLB as a Lesson**

In hopes of responding to the deep concerns raised in *A Nation at Risk*, the No Child Left Behind Act entered as a sweeping solution to complex problem. The policy placed the federal government in the position of punishing schools and providing them with the only sources of solutions to problems which had been embedded for decades as schools continued to underperform. In establishing education as a form of public marketplace and pitting schools against each other in volatile competition, NCLB uncovered larger issues of the public education system in America and even acted to exacerbate other issues. The policy did not provide adequate funding for its initiatives, it produced ineffective solutions for failing schools, established test-based education that has yet to produce results which elevate American scores

above other countries, and placed teachers, students, and administration into an environment conducive to cheating, rule bending, and stress. This at first widely supported initiative became quickly controversial, and yet was based on the ever-growing fear that unless American students were prepared to participate in a global economy through school, America would continue to fall behind.

No Child Left Behind provided a failing solution to a problem that could not even truly be fixed by education. *A Nation at Risk* placed unprecedented blame on the American education system for being one of the main reasons the United States could no longer compete globally. The report placed education at the forefront of the fight and demanded that it be viewed as a contractual agreement between teachers and students to prepare them for jobs in a shifting economy. What was never considered, however, was whether the underlying assumption that education is fundamentally meant to solely prepare an individual for work was valid and would prove effective. As can be seen by the stagnant performance measures since the early 2000s in graduation rate, equality, educational attainment and job placement, this assumption may in itself be flawed.

## What Education Can Fix

Fundamentally, education in America today, as shown by *A Nation at Risk* and the No Child Left Behind Act, is seen as a marketplace which both parallels the activities of private corporations and prepares youth for the capitalistic society that they will live in. This ideology, however, has established an environment of competition which, rather than boosting and encouraging performance, results in stagnant performance on reading, writing, math and science. If the American view of education can instead shift to community-based engagement and collaboration as opposed to competition, some aspects of individual participation in American society could be improved. Shifting away from teaching to a test, and towards a focus on civics education infused into traditional curriculum, along with space made for untested topic areas including the arts could simultaneously affect how we view modern education. Rather than simply used as a promise of a job after graduation as *A Nation at Risk* implies, education could be a collaboration between communities and students on the development of both global and local citizens.

### **Civics Education:**

Although incredibly concerned about American education failing students in search of a job, so far American policy has not reacted to the dire state of civics awareness among its school-aged and young adult population. Voter participation is at its lowest point since 1996, public trust in government is at only 18% and only about 26% of the American population can name all three branches of the government (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). The lack of effective civics education in the United States has long term consequences and establishes a cycle of unawareness passed on between generations. The American education system can be a location

to break the cycle of low participation and unawareness in order to promote democratic ideals, civic engagement, and the development of participating community-based citizens with a foundation for life in a democracy.

Performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Exam has virtually stagnated since 1998 (Shapiro & Brown, 2018), another education statistic which has remained unmoving since the market-based education system was implemented and institutionalized. A current widely supported solution is requiring high school students to pass a citizenship test in order to graduate from high school (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). This initiative, however, adds to the environment of high stakes testing rather than reorganizing the way we view education. Additionally, this will add another obstacle in the process of graduating which could in itself reduce graduation rates (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Additionally, current state civics curriculum relies heavily on knowledge-based learning rather than skills and agency-based education for civic engagement. Civics education in 32 states focuses instruction on American democracy and history along with an explanation of mechanisms for public participation while no states have physical experiential learning or problem-solving aspects within their civics programs (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Few states focus any education on civics because, as discussed above, most programming for students is based on what will be tested, leaving little time for more well-rounded curriculum development. In states that do prioritize civics courses and engagement, however, show higher rates of youth voter participation and volunteer rates (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Civics education today, much like the rest of the American education curriculum, varies state to state and school to school (Shapiro & Brown, 2018), and yet one of the main ideals that America prides itself on is its long-lasting democracy. If this is something

valued by all Americans, the education system should be able to focus time and energy on democratic awareness building.

Some states and nonprofit organizations have established creative programs which focus on preparing students for democratic participation. If expanded and applied to nationwide programming, these programs could shift some of the narrative of education policy from simply preparing students for economic gain to preparing them to live as active citizens- voting and participating in government and in their community. Specifically, Colorado and Idaho have established and designed detailed curricula for civics education to cover the structure of American government, methods of public participation, a comparison of foreign governments, and the responsibilities of citizenship (Shapiro and Brown, 2018). This program is supplemented by the state department of education in Colorado and is further improved by experiential learning with local judges (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Idaho integrates civics education into their schools in early grade school. These lessons are taught in tandem with the rest of the curriculum and seek to prepare students for civics-related topics in high school (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Colorado and Idaho supplement traditional education with preparation for students to participate in the communities where they will be finding jobs. The programs also encourage volunteerism and community give-back programs which can instill values of service and duty within students.

Nonprofit organizations have also stepped in to supplement inadequate civics education curriculums across the country. Organizations like Teaching Tolerance, Generation Citizen, and Kids Voting have emerged to support civics initiatives taking place in individual districts. Teaching Tolerance provides free materials to schools to emphasize social justice in existing school curricula, while Generation Citizen teaches “action civics” to middle and high school students through real-world engagement and community-based problem solving (Shapiro &

Brown, 2018). Kids Vote implements community engagement programs to promote voting, how to vote, mock votes, following debates and policy issues, and tracking local elections. Kids Vote, when used as a brief school intervention in 2002, drew news attention, encouraged discussion, rose levels of civic identity and encouraged participation in deliberative democracy (McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2006). The program had persisting effects as it helped to establish long term cognition and deliberative habits in democratic participation and spurred conversation between parents and children about politics and policy democracy (McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2006). Programs in public schools could model this program and would focus on localized issues for the community as samples of civic participation and engagement. This could promote engagement in local politics and general awareness of the needs of students' towns, schools, and cities. With the success of these local organizations working to improve civic participation on a local level, their work begs us to ask whether extensive civics education across the country could influence long term political engagement, volunteerism, and improve the sense of community felt in young adults as they enter the workforce. It also begs the question of whether once these individuals felt a deeper connection to their local government and community, more students would consider staying and living in their communities while finding jobs, raising families, and living within their local economies.

While these results seem promising, and a uniform civics program could have positive impacts on students across the country, any new program will experience the same limitations that the current system does. Civics education cannot fix the underlying restrictions students face discussed above. Students in disadvantaged situations may be more focused on where their next meal will be coming from than attendance at school, fueling an absenteeism crisis that cannot be solved through new programming. Restrictions at home keeping students from accessing the

education already being offered cannot be alleviated by additional curriculum. These restrictions are bigger than education policy.

### **A New Social Strategy:**

Years of continued policy focused on neoliberal views of education show that the direction of the American education system does not seem to be shifting on its own. Despite years of research which prove that high stakes testing is ineffective and current policy leaves graduation rates stagnant and global competition at mediocre levels, the fundamental view of education as a free market is sustained. To change this perspective, some power lies in the hands of students, teachers, principals and administrators. Jean Anyon, in her book called “Radical Possibilities, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement,” argues that the most effective way to shift the values of policy makers on education is an organized movement lead by those who know education best and their advocating allies (Anyon, 2014). For too long, she believes, educators have been expected to follow the guidelines they are handed by the federal government while working to mitigate damages to their students as much as possible. The traditional ideology has been to continue editing current strings of policy to react to new problems which arise rather than addressing the idea that the underlying way that this nation views education is flawed and based on economic principle rather than nurturing America’s youth. Anyon encourages partnership between teachers, principals and outside organizations with national presence to work on behalf of disenfranchised communities (Anyon, 2014). She explains that social movements like the Civil Rights Movement pushed in ways that placed economic and social pressure on policymakers (Anyon, 2014). She believes that this movement can be replicated. This movement would be based in urban districts and would produce a collaboration

between progressive education organizations, labor unions, living wage movements, and other organizations that work on behalf of minorities that are disproportionately impacted by negative education policies (Polakow & Pettigrew, 2006). Such a social movement would demand a change in the way that the country views education and would draw direct attention to failing urban schools which currently receive the brunt of the ineffective and punitive measures taken by the federal government.

Anyon calls on the nation's youth, along with their educators, to engage in this movement and push it forward through cross-generational alliances (Anyon, 2014). Students are the individuals being directly harmed by poor education policy, but communities as a whole suffer when youth are not educated to become productive citizens in society. Anyon describes the ability of such a movement to develop an empowered constituency among educators and students which could shift the needle on education policy and draw attention to its failure under its current mission (Anyon, 2014).

### **Education as a Social Movement:**

While recent legislation has exacerbated the problems facing the American education system and rhetoric blames the system for the nation's inability to compete on a global scale, educators recognize that there are elements beyond their control which limit their ability to improve test scores or proficiency in expected subject areas. Testing has been proven ineffective and rates have remained stagnant among students since 2000 despite over a half dozen policy changes since the 1965 implementation of a federal education policy. Therefore, there must be a fundamental flaw in the way policy is approaching the issue as a whole.

Diane Ravitch encourages the federal government to switch roles with the states; allowing states to develop solutions to problems with new goals set by the federal government (Ravitch, 2010). Certain states and local nonprofit organizations encourage a shift of focus towards civics education and a more well-rounded curriculum which weaves traditional education with experiential learning which prepares students for not only employment after graduation but general participation in a democratic society (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Finally, Jean Anyon recommends that students, educators and administrators embrace their power and develop an organized social movement which engages outside stakeholders and partners with groups which work on behalf of minority communities which have historically experienced the negative impacts of poor education policy disproportionately (Anyon, 2014). Such a movement could give a voice to those directly involved in the education system rather than a federal government without the tools to provide solutions to deeply embedded problems within the system. Together, these initiatives could work to shift the rhetoric on education policy in the country from a neoliberal competition perspective and towards a community engagement partnership based on ideals of democracy and growth as a group.

## **The Education System in Context**

### **What Education Can Not Fix:**

Defined in *A Nation At Risk* as a main cause of Americans inability to compete nationally and one which “undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), education policy has been viewed nationally as the fundamental solution to increased global competition. Education is also today seen as “the great equalizer” and the source to break the cycle of poverty across the country (Polakow & Pettigrew, 2006). Despite the unwavering belief that education can solve the nation’s most pressing issues, however, endless changes to policy have done little to actually improve the state of the nation or even the state of education independently. Although there are some aspects of education which can be fixed through policy change as discussed above, education alone cannot fix the deeply embedded problems facing American students, teachers and administrators. There is much more to the picture. Social determinants of education performance keep students from being able to succeed in the most productive of schools, and policies related to welfare and income which were completely restructured around the same time that our notion of education changed as *A Nation at Risk* was released, keeps the education system in its own cycle of underperformance.

### **The Failing Welfare State:**

Education is often seen as a way to ‘fix poverty’ in a country because a functioning system is supposed to produce individuals who are career minded and pursue a life of success and financial stability. Yet, the need for a quality welfare system to support the poorest Americans is still necessary to provide for the millions of individuals across the country reliant

on government support for survival. Graduation rates and proficiency rates have stagnated or increased slightly, and the United States remains in the middle of the pack on test scores compared to the rest of the developed world (DeSilver, 2017). Additionally, the share of the U.S. poor population in severe poverty was 45.6% in 2016, an increase from 39.5% since 1996. Poor families have also seen their incomes fall further below the poverty line, making it harder and harder to escape the cycle of poverty and save (Bialik, 2017). Census data from 2015 shows that around 52 million people in the United States participate in major government assistance programs each month, and 43% of participants remain in these programs between 37 and 48 months (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Among school aged children, more than 13 million live in poverty, and families with children make up 40% of the homeless population. Additionally, 12.6 million homes do not experience food security (Polakow & Pettigrew, 2005). This data leaves the United States as last among 26 other industrialized nations in the alleviation of child poverty (UNICEF 2005) and has severe impacts on the educational experiences of these children. Critical educational funding is currently dedicated to providing many disadvantaged students with extra nutritional, psychological, and educational help through school lunch programs, or extra counseling (Boghani, 2017). Teachers and administrators have become both educators, and a support system for students facing difficulties at home. While these are important functions of schools, there is a deep connection between a failing welfare system and resources being stretched thin in schools as teachers can only control the classroom, not the environment where students spend their time outside of school. With so many individuals in need of extra support, an effective welfare system is vital to protect America's poorest citizens but with recent reform, this seems almost impossible.

Welfare took on a new definition under FDR with New Deal liberalism by highlighting government protections of individuals and emphasizing economic security through the redefinition of the American social contract (Milkis, 2002, p. 33). This shift came following the Great Depression when most Americans needed help in some capacity and ultimately resulted in the Social Security Act of 1935. FDR established bold policies to deal with the emergency of the Great Depression. These protective services were popular and widely supported until the term welfare began to lose its attractive connotation and garnered a narrower definition of public assistance (Katz, 2008, p. 4). Quickly, welfare shifted from protective services to being seen as programs that only served the “undeserving” poor (Katz, 2008, p. 4).

Critiques of the welfare state and its drastic transformation paralleled the resurgence of conservatism and frustration with the new order that had grown under New Deal liberalism and welfare. Conservatism in the late twentieth century was fed by southern and suburban frustration with economic concerns and race tensions (Katz, 2008, p. 18). These concerns culminated with the successful election of Ronald Reagan. With this new form of conservatism came a war on dependence and a shift to prioritizing markets. This is a parallel to the release of *A Nation at Risk* during Ronald Reagan’s administration. The shift to a focus on neoliberalism and the prioritizing of markets was indicative of the shift in ideology on education. Both welfare and education became a means for the growth of free market reform rather than policies focused on growth, development and support. As Jean Anyon argues, despite education’s defined promise as the nation’s “great equalizer,” education policy should be questioned within a time of widespread de-unionization, outsourcing, diminished benefits, high levels of poverty, and the low wage floor which dominated the conservative welfare movement and kept the urban poor from progressing in both education and the economy (Anyon, 2014). She argues that what makes both education and American society

unequal is in fact the combination of welfare reform and prioritization of markets which sustains wealth inequality and limits economic mobility and progression. By focusing on market reforms however, new conservatives wanted to decentralize the government. Led by Reagan, the new regime acted to privatize as much as possible, linking dependence to failure within the market economy (Katz, 2008, p. 26) and adding increasingly negative connotations to the concept of welfare.

To follow the rhetoric of the time, welfare policy became stricter and more punitive. Bill Clinton quickly called to completely transform welfare during his presidency. What followed, was the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill which retracted most of the successes of the Social Security Act by FDR which had focused on protecting the poorest Americans. Now, the neediest Americans would no longer be entitled to public assistance. The bill placed time limits on benefits, tied aid to work requirements, shifted control of policy from the federal government to the states and finally reduced, or in some cases eliminated, eligibility for legal immigrants and the disabled (Katz, 2008, p. 1). Where FDR had believed that America could reduce poverty by protecting individuals from the market, the new belief established under Reagan and institutionalized under Clinton was that poverty would only end if the poorest Americans were pushed into the workforce and strictly limited in access to aid. Following "*A Nation at Risk*," the Reagan administration saw education as an important steppingstone in this process as the newly identified goal of education was to produce competitive members of the workforce (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). New policies figured that an effective and accountability-based education and welfare system would produce a competitive workforce free of poverty. Today however, deep levels of poverty remain. Increasingly conservative constraints placed on welfare have left

individuals with few options in breaking the cycle of poverty and have thus opened a door for testing the impacts of a more robust welfare state to protect the nation's most vulnerable.

### **Poverty and The Social Determinants of Education**

The presence of performance gaps between urban and suburban schools, low- and high-income students, and race, indicates that issues within the American education persist and participate in the perpetuation of inequality throughout life. But as we have seen, many of the issues that prevent students from high achievement do not come from the schools themselves but rather from the factors beyond school in students' lives that both discourage or physically prevent them from completing their education. These factors coupled with limited access to resources for schools in high poverty areas makes success difficult and accountability in terms of the No Child Left Behind Act pointless and punitive. Such concerns coupled with high rates of poverty across the country and a lack of effective welfare reform to support families in need work in tandem to prevent many students from achievement in education.

There is discussion surrounding health policy which asks us to consider the social conditions that people live in when determining the status of health of particular groups or areas. "Conditions in the places where people live, learn, work and play affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes" (CDC, 2019), and these conditions have been labeled social determinants of health (SDOH). Such determinants impact an individual's short-term and long-term health goals and can be limited by limited access to healthy foods, safe neighborhoods, unstable housing, low income, or even poor education. Health policy is considering each of these factors in its development, understanding that equity will not be achieved unless the barriers that many of these social determinants build are torn down.

This begs the question, however, of whether these social determinants should also be considered in education. The social determinants of education achievement align closely with those of health. Just as education attainment effects long-term health, health of students impacts their ability to succeed in education. Just as substandard housing with mold, or asbestos, or no heat and electricity can impact a child's health, it can also limit a child's ability to complete homework or learn outside of the classroom. This logic is the same for access to food. If a student must focus more on finding dinner than the importance of their education, priorities will be developed which limit their attendance and success. One study specifically found that skipping breakfast, an act disproportionately prevalent among urban minority youth in schools, has a negative impact on academic achievement of those individuals (Basch, 2011). Students without access consistently to food alone can experience adverse effects within their schooling.

Safety of neighborhoods, public transportation, and familial support systems, and persistent poverty also work as social determinants of a child's success in education. Students experiencing poverty are less likely to experience high levels of health, typically have a smaller vocabulary than middle-class students, experience faster loss of hope or optimism within their schooling, experience higher rates of cognition problems, and higher rates of stress and absence (Jensen, 2013). These are concerns that education policy as it exists now cannot directly address. Teachers can work to address issues in the classroom, working on vocabulary practice or establishing strong relationships with students (Jensen, 2013), but these tips for teachers cannot address the underlying causes of student difficulties in achievement. Without looking at the societal aspects impacting an individual's success in the classroom, or grade on a test, education policy is lacking in a true understanding of the problem.

### **Programs to Alleviate the Impact of Social Determinants:**

Many schools and regions recognize the impact of a child's home life on their success in the classroom and have been working to alleviate the impact of these barriers through holistic programming or supplemental initiatives to support students and their families. The first obvious example of this is free and reduced lunches, a program that has been in place since 1946 under Harry Truman (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). This program, implemented at all public and non-profit schools, is directed at reducing the burden for families with low incomes in paying for lunch and keeping students from being hungry during school. Schools, in addition to free and reduced lunches, have counselors that work with children facing difficulty at home, whether it is divorce, or an ill family member, or any familial stressor they may be experiencing, in hopes of alleviating some of this stress in order for the student to fully experience their education.

In addition to in schoolwork, programs like Promise Zones, a national initiative originally based on the Harlem Children's Zones initiative, and School Based Health Centers work to attack social determinants of education on a larger scale.

Harlem Children's Zone is a charter school program aimed at holistic programming which takes students from early childhood to collegiate success through its variety of programming from before kindergarten until graduation (Harlem Children's Zone, 2019). Beginning before Kindergarten, the zone works with families to educate them on childhood development and begins year-round pre-k for young students. Once in elementary school, students receive in school and after school support to stay on top of their work and continue their success. As students get older, they receive and experience tutoring, emotional support, cultural events, and general guidance to ensure they are supported throughout the process. In addition to

holistic educational programming, Harlem Children's Zones also work with the community to develop community centers to promote a safe place for families to grow, play and learn. Finally, they work on health through physical activity, wellness and food services (Harlem Children's Zone, 2019). This program was highlighted in the development of the Promise Neighborhoods initiative in which schools across the country would embrace this framework for education and replicate it in other locations. Promise Neighborhoods would integrate a curriculum that provided "cradle-to-career" support for educational and family programs (United States Department of Education, 2018). The goal of this program is to alleviate the difficulties that face often urban families experiencing poverty described by Jean Anyon. Families in poverty face an uphill battle outside of the classroom as they deal with limited access to welfare support and continually low wages which lock families into a cycle of poverty. Harlem Children Zone's work to provide support for families as a replacement for the aid inaccessible at a federal level. Creating a community mentality and a culture of support is what drives this program in an attempt to provide some equity to students struggling to focus on their education.

Despite its holistic approach, success and support for this initiative is unclear. While many think that it is a strong response to high rates of poverty in communities seeking help, results are mixed for graduation rates and economic achievement long-term for graduates (Katz, 2008). Additionally, their high and ever-growing budget sponsored largely by corporate funding has mixed responses as public schools struggle with funding and resource management (Katz, 2008). Additionally, corporate funding implies that such corporations have some control over the system of education (Katz, 2008), which returns to concerns over viewing education as a means to economic ends as well as a part of the free market.

School based health centers, often placed in low income school districts, provide primary health care, mental health care, social services, dental care, and health education to students K-12 and staff (Knopf et al., 2016). It has been found that the implementation of these centers increases levels of health for disadvantaged students by reducing financial, cultural or transportation obstacles to receiving care, and increases levels of education attainment by removing health-related obstacles from the path to education for these students such as missing school due to illness and chronic absenteeism (Knopf et al., 2016).

These are just two examples of schools themselves working to alleviate many of the stressors placed on students which impede their educational experience. The fact that these programs exist in any capacity, shows the clear need for policy to deal specifically with the social determinants of educational attainment rather than curriculum and administrative changes. Schools themselves are unable to promote equity among their student body and make sure that every student when they step into a classroom can fully focus on the work at hand. These broad programs have been working to patch the issue while policy lags in fixing the true holes in society which prevent students from succeeding. Despite the work done by education policy dating back to 1965 under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to boost accountability, funding and graduation rates, students are still being left behind in schools that cannot fix it alone. Disparities within education at home and flailing records abroad coupled with our century long struggle to solve these issues shows that there is something bigger causing these problems for students across the country. While there is programmatic space to develop education itself, such as a new nationalized civics curriculum, the opportunity for widespread student success will not occur as a result of more education policy, but instead from welfare policies that address the social determinants of education at their source.

## Looking Forward

Fixing the perils of the American education system requires major curriculum shifts discussed above. But the many underlying factors keeping students from achieving in the classroom can not be fixed by education policy alone. The very fundamental way that we view education; as a market of competition among schools preparing students for a global economy is detrimental, but this neoliberal ideology that took force under Reagan has permeated every aspect of our public policy. The ways we, as Americans deal with housing, health care, and welfare in policy have secondary effects on our education system and must be addressed before programmatic changes can make any real improvements.

Students experiencing homelessness have graduation rates even lower than those of economically disadvantaged students and less than a third achieve proficiency in reading, math or science (School House Connection, 2020). This shows the deeply limiting impacts of homelessness among students. Today, about 1.5 million children and youth are experiencing homelessness, an 11% increase from the previous tally (School House Connection, 2020). This is a record number for the United States (School House Connection, 2020). Children in these situations may experience instability at home, limited access to food or a consistent place to complete school or supplemental work (School House Connection, 2020). Constant moving can make attendance and enrollment difficult and again limits a child's ability to prioritize school (School House Connection, 2020). Schools alone cannot alleviate these concerns for students and therefore would require substantial federal action to reduce homelessness across the board. The biggest risk factor in a young student's life to continue experiencing homelessness as a young person, is completing high school, making a successful education critical (School House Connection, 2020). Intervention therefore must start with policy. This can start with passing

legislation that will work to prevent and address homelessness through the making of affordable housing more accessible across the country in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods. Federal appropriated funds to affordable housing developments could work to provide families with more long-term homes in which a more stable learning environment can be established (Daniel, 2018). Affordable housing itself can of course not end poverty and provide every child with a positive learning environment outside of the classroom, but these types of policies, coupled with programmatic support in the classroom and other broad social policies can work to make the classroom itself more accessible.

Beyond access to affordable housing, students and their families require access to reliable and affordable health care to avoid repetitive absence and long-term negative health impacts. Currently, around 20 million children in America lack access to health care (PNHP, 2016). These children may not have health insurance, may not receive routine primary care, or may not have access to specific specialty care when needed. Under the affordable care act, the uninsured rate for children fell from 13.9% in 1997 to 4.5% in 2015, but many children still need coverage (PNHP, 2016). Those uninsured also correlate with marginalized communities and financial barriers keep children from accessing necessary health care services (PNHP, 2016). School based health centers, as discussed above, attempted to close some of this insurance gap by providing healthcare resources to children through schools. This was intended to save children and families time and money while implementing health lifestyles to help children prioritize their schooling and reduce long term absence due to illness or sickness of a family member (Knopf et al., 2016). To prevent unnecessary spending and use of resources of schools for School Based Health Centers, broader federal policy to support health care coverage for all Americans would be an important step in reducing the social barriers of education for students. Questioning the status

quo in health insurance and healthcare is essential in improving the overall public health of students and their families (Woolhandler, Himmelstein, & Young, 1993). A form of a single-payer national health program could assure universal coverage rather than spotty funding and support for necessary medical checkups, medicine, and procedures (Woolhandler et al., 1993). Currently, 18 developed nations offer universal health coverage in which 100% of their population are covered, while several other countries have achieved almost universal coverage with a 98% covered population (Montgomery, 2020). A universal health care system would be a broad policy initiative that would be necessary to insure students and provide them access to healthcare to keep them physically and mentally healthy in preparation for school and day to day life.

Federal policies like affordable housing and universal health care must be coupled with an effective welfare program which protects America's most at-risk populations. As discussed earlier, welfare reform has made unemployment benefits and support for the poor increasingly punitive and constricting. An often-made assumption is that there is a cycle of generational poverty; those that are impoverished as children will remain in poverty unless someone or some policy intervenes at some point in their lives (Stand Together, 2017). Currently, education is seen as a chance to break into this cycle as education is integral to intellectual, physical and emotional growth in preparation for life after graduation (Stand Together, 2017). Graduation from high school, let alone higher education, however, is made incredibly harder for low-income students by social determinants like instability and distress at home, poor food access, unaffordable housing, limited access to health care, and low wages that limit a caregivers ability to support students (Stand Together, 2017). To address the cycle of poverty and allow students a chance of a successful educational experience, welfare policy should be more supportive of families of

low-income. This could be done by raising the minimum wage, increasing unemployment benefits with no restrictions, or an expansion of programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Despite the changes to welfare discussed above, fewer poor children are receiving assistance and the plight of the poor continues to spread rather than be contained (Sawhill, 2001). Poverty is dynamic and constantly changing (Spicker, 2020). There is no one answer or work requirement that can solve it as economic and social trends ebb and flow with policy and politics (Spicker, 2020). Instead of punitive measures, to help those in most desperate need of support, aid should not be tied to work or have time limits, and food stamps should be expanded to allow families to provide healthy meals to young children preparing for school. For those with vulnerable or low incomes, it is essential that policy protect these wages and we promote economic development to raise or solidify these wages (Spicker, 2020). For those with a lack of resources in accessing food or health care, we must provide them with relief through resource allocation (Spicker, 2020). Social programs like these to protect the poor are important in providing stability and positive living environments for families.

This list of policies is not exhaustive, and many have been discussed and debated at all levels of government for decades. While these ideas alone cannot reduce all barriers to success, it is important that we consider them as a jumping off place with the potential to reach failures in education at the source rather than in schools themselves. The point here is to say that the cycle of poverty begins when a child cannot complete their education because of limitations at home and continues when that child cannot escape poverty without the high school or college degree. Someone must intervene at some point in this cycle. According to *A Nation at Risk* and the No Child Left Behind Act, intervention was meant to happen in schools to close the gap and provide extra support for those in the most need. Interventions in schools however seem fruitless, as

graduation rates remain stagnant, chronic absenteeism limits success, and there is a lack of proficiency on standardized tests in schools all across America. Perhaps it is time to step back and consider at what level intervention may be most effective. Where accountability standards have failed, perhaps societal changes to impact the social determinants in education may be the key to allowing students to prioritize their education and finally find the success necessary to break the cycle.

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