

## Schooling in the United States

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**In the neoliberal restructuring of post-secondary education, issues in educational systems surfaced most strongly in the United States. This essay addresses U.S. schooling and the efforts to reform its institutions. If the task of reform at the local levels of primary and secondary education is daunting, educational reform in the US is increasingly focused on post-secondary education.**

### Concerns About Mass Public Education

Why has school reform appeared on the agenda of many developed nations in recent years? This trend can be interpreted as a response to perceived problems in the model of schooling that developed after World War II when it was part of the “social contract” between capital and labor (and in the Communist bloc as a part of a program of socialist transformation). In the post-war period, mass public education was extended from elementary school to secondary and post-secondary levels and contributed to the growth of the middle strata by preparing young people of working-class origin for expanding white collar, managerial, and professional occupations.

But by the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this model was exposed to multiple stresses—a resurgence of disparities, escalating expectations in a new economy, and shrinking public support—a “scissors crisis” of growing challenges and decreasing political and economic resources. The public education systems seemed less able to deliver “equality of opportunity” and “the career open to talent” to the emerging working class, now extensively composed of immigrants and communities of color, in contrast to its relative successes in the post-war period. At the same time, the competitive globalized economy made the goals of education more difficult and demanding. And thirdly, while these challenges were escalating, the resources of public education were shrinking, if not in actual finances, in political and public support within the larger neoliberal restructuring of the political economy.

Critics of the existing educational institutions and proponents of school reform emerged across a broad spectrum of ideology that included those concerned about children’s failure to meet minimum standards as well as those who called for more choice and quasi-market models even at the cost of further increasing class and ethno-racial gaps; and some observers argued that mass

public education has become irrelevant to contemporary global capitalism. The critics seemed to agree that the mass public education model was not working, but the analysis of causes and the prescriptions for change were wildly divergent.

Post-secondary education had moved through a three-stage trajectory from the pre-war phase when it provided intellectual polish and valuable network connections to the affluent to a democratized phase lasting from the 1940s to the 1970s when it offered an important and affordable step in upward mobility for children of the working class<sup>1</sup> to the current stage in which it is seen as a necessity for maintaining a middle-class position, and in the countries that underwent neoliberal restructuring, these costs are borne largely by individuals and families.

These kinds of issues in educational systems surfaced in many nations but most strongly in the United States.

### **Decentralization and Disparities in the US**

The central issues in schooling in America reflect longstanding issues in the society as a whole: an underfunded public sector; a high degree of political, cultural, and fiscal decentralization; and racial inequality. The extreme degree of decentralization presents a major obstacle to national efforts to reform education. Progressive reformers view education as a means of bringing about greater equality and a spirit of critical intelligence; neoliberals (such as education policy makers associated with the George W. Bush administration) concern themselves with education insofar as it can heighten America's global competitiveness. Decentralization frustrates both efforts<sup>2</sup>.

As a percentage of nation-wide expenditures on education in both the public and the private sector, the federal government now provides somewhat over 8%, up from about 5% in the early 1990s. Public school finances are therefore a responsibility divided between state governments and local governments<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to disparities among states and among districts within states, public education was marked by disparities arising from white supremacy. Throughout the South, de jure segregation confined black children to drastically underfunded and inadequate schools; and even after the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court school desegregation

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<sup>1</sup> supported by the GI Bill and low-cost public-sector loans in the U.S. and subsidized university costs in both western European and Communist-bloc economies)

<sup>2</sup> Decentralization of education funding and decision making was enshrined in the Constitution and built into the public education system in the early years of the Republic. As regions were settled and incorporated into the nation as states, they were responsible for establishing and financing their own schools, with little support from the federal government.

<sup>3</sup> The exact formula varies from state to state, but overall close to 40% of school financing is based on local property taxes and/or sales taxes rather than on state income taxes. The decentralized financing arrangements quickly led to growing disparities among states and among districts within a state, and these disparities persist.

decision, de facto racial isolation and disparities persisted in the South. But large disparities in educational attainment between whites and African Americans became manifest in northern cities as well because residential segregation in the urban North maintained marked differences in school quality and educational opportunities. Even as gaps between non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics narrow, the black-white gap persists.

A remarkable phenomenon is emerging in the United States: educational reform is increasingly focused at the last years of education, in the post-secondary system, rather than at the base in primary schooling. With fifty-one states (counting Washington, DC as one of the states) and over 14000 school districts, the task of reform at the local levels of primary and secondary education is daunting. Thus reformers are increasingly looking to post-secondary education as a royal road that circumvents the enormous local obstacles. Discussion of educational reform in the United States must now include the post-secondary initiatives (pursued by the Obama administration but by state and local policy makers as well).

In part these differences can be explained in terms of the rural or urban character of the district and local, state, and regional differences in the cost of living, but they are also closely related to cultural values and public decision making. States dominated by the Republican Party (generally in the South and West), as well as small towns throughout the nation, are reluctant to spend tax money and see themselves as providing adequate schooling without large expenditures. The politically active population in these areas follows a vision of cultural conservatism and would like to be immune from issues of global competition. Many of them see little need to pursue educational goals that are variously believed to be elitist (the pursuit of “academic excellence”), catering to Black and Latino minorities, and/or driven by an unwelcome competitive globalization.

### **The Outcomes of this Unequal System**

On the outcome side of the ledger, high or low academic achievement of a school district can in large measure be predicted by two variables: expenditures; and the percentage of students in poverty. Not surprisingly, school districts with high per-pupil expenditures and affluent students enjoy the best results: high standardized test scores and excellent rates of attendance at leading four-year colleges and universities for their graduates. These schools are the incubators for the great achievements of the top-tier U.S. universities in scientific research and intellectual vitality. Not surprisingly, these schools are located in areas where residential real estate values and property taxes are high, and in turn, the presence of these schools in an area drives up residential real estate values, so that the best local public schools are generally attended by the children of affluent parents.

A sizable number of school districts in urban areas represent a second pattern: they have high per pupil expenditures but disappointing outcomes, with low test scores and relatively low percentages attaining a secondary school diploma –a situation predictable from the high percentage of low-income students. Poverty is in turn related to race and ethnicity; the median non-Hispanic white household income is about \$58,000 whereas the median African American household income is about \$35,000, and the poverty rates for these two racial categories are respectively about 10% and 27%, with Hispanics in an intermediate position on these measures.

The following “box” features the Chicago public school system as an example of one of these troubled large urban school systems.

### **Schooling in Chicago: a short study case**

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is in some ways typical of large city school systems in its demographics, fiscal difficulties and outright corruption, expanding neoliberal ideology, and tension between the teacher’s union and the city and state power structures. Compared to other cities, Chicago’s mayor exercises strong control over CPS, and public education in this city has been fundamentally shaped by the city’s extremely high level of residential racial segregation.

As in many big-city public school systems, CPS enrollment of over 400,000 youngsters is overwhelmingly composed of students of color: 45% of the students are Hispanic, 40% are African American, 9% are white, and 6% are “other” (mostly of Asian origin or multi-racial). The school district is comprised of over 650 schools of which about 480 are elementary schools and 180 are high schools. Of the School District’s 42,000 employees, 22,000 are teachers, suggesting a high ratio of clerical and administrative staff to classroom teachers. CPS is supervised by an appointed school board, controlled by the mayor, and by a CEO (the new neoliberal “business-speak” term for school superintendent), also selected by the mayor. The mayor’s power in the public school system is exceptionally strong in Chicago.

CPS has a decades-long history of struggling with the challenges associated with the poverty, residential segregation, and racial isolation of students and their families. Efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to integrate the schools were curtailed by white flight from the city and from public schools, and the attempts to integrate the system gave way to more targeted initiatives of developing magnet schools and academies that were able to maintain a modest level of white and middle-class enrollment. Some of these schools and programs were indeed quite effective and academically high-performing but they were not typical of the overall system. Many schools fell short of standardized test goals, overall graduation rates were shockingly low (in the first decade of the century, less than 50% of African American males in the CPS system completed high school), and CPS graduates often did not fare well in post-secondary education.

In recent years, new situations have emerged: The student body became increasingly Hispanic in ethnic origin, and many predominantly African American schools were defined as both “under-performing” and “under-enrolled.” These two reasons were used by the mayor to shut down 50 schools at the beginning of the 2014 school year, despite parent protests. Some of these schools were replaced by charter schools, public entities that are exempt from teacher unionization and are allowed to select students rather than

take all children residing in a district. The record of charter schools in Chicago (and the nation) is very uneven, and a substantial number perform no better than the regular public schools.

In the past couple of years, CPS faced a worsening fiscal crisis, with a budget deficit of a billion dollars (in a budget of \$5.6 billion). The CEO, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, was indicted and convicted of taking bribes to steer a \$23 million no-bid contract to her former employer, an educational consulting firm, and she was replaced by the mayor with a caretaker officer with little experience in education. Both the mayor and the anti-union state governor have tried to reduce the power of the teacher's union, and the union is now charging that salary increases won in 2013-14 have not been forthcoming. Impending teacher layoffs may damage the system, further reducing the number of individuals who are actually in the classroom delivering an education. The Republican governor is pushing a plan for the state to take over CPS, with the notion of pushing it into bankruptcy in order to restructure it in an anti-union direction.

As in many areas of American life, the public sector is in crisis, perceived as an institution to be either avoided altogether or turned into a differentiated quasi-market structure in which savvy individuals can exercise "choice." Families with resources are remaining in the city, with their children either in special public school programs or in private institutions, while families of modest means are more likely to opt out of the urban school system and move to the suburbs.

A less predictable story concerns not these extremes (between the wealthiest and best funded districts and the ones that have to contend with a burden of poverty and inequality), but the vast and undistinguished middle of the educational system. Many school districts in small towns and less affluent suburbs, with low to average per pupil expenditures and middling rates of poverty, fall somewhere in the middle of the national scale of educational outcomes, but the results are often mediocre on a global scale as revealed in international comparisons that show US youngsters lagging in reading, science, and especially math.

### **College: Panacea or Debt-trap?**

Post-secondary education is increasingly seen as essential for entering the middle class and for preserving middle-class status inter-generationally. Two forces are at work here: the deficiencies of many high schools have pushed attainment of even basic skills and knowledge into post-secondary institutions; and people are acting on the widely-held belief that post-secondary schooling is the key to upward mobility. This faith in higher education is not entirely spurious; college grads do indeed make more money in the course of a lifetime than high school grads and the income gap has widened in recent years. There appear to be few routes into the "middle class" other than acquisition of a college education.

The surge in college attendance is closely linked to the soaring burden of student loan debt which now constitutes about 10% of all consumer debt. The transition to the "high-tuition, high-aid" model is one factor that underlies the increase in student debt. Student loans are among the most troubled types of debt with 1/3 of repayments considered to be "seriously past due"; and a lively

discussion is under way whether or not student loan repayment is forcing an entire cohort to postpone household formation and home purchasing and causing young people to take unappealing jobs that are unrelated to their educational qualifications. The cost of college has led to increasingly frantic efforts to assess the value of higher education solely in terms of the job market and future income, with both the choice of majors and institutions rated by journalists and government in terms of estimates of their graduates' future earnings.

Nearly 70% of all high school grads now attend colleges (including community colleges) and half of all Americans between the ages of 25 and 35 have a college degree. A four-year college education is very expensive: the average cost of tuition and fees (not counting living expenses) for the 2014–2015 school year was \$31,000 at private colleges, \$9,000 for state residents at public colleges, and \$23,000 for out-of-state residents attending public universities.

Contrary to the popular misconception that private schools and charter schools are now a big component of U.S. education, the vast majority of youngsters in the United States attend public schools in the years from kindergarten through high school graduation (“K – 12”). Only about 10% attend private schools, such as Catholic schools (a large but declining segment), private Christian academies, and independent private schools. Of the 90% who attend public schools, only 5% of children and adolescents attend charter schools, a type of institution that operates somewhat outside of the usual state and local regulations.

There are enormous disparities in per-pupil school expenditures among states and districts. The highest spending states—New York, Alaska, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, and Connecticut—spend over \$16,000 per pupil annually, whereas the lowest spending states—Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Mississippi—spend between \$6,500 and \$8,100<sup>4</sup>.

In recent decades general state subsidies for public higher education were withdrawn in exchange for a "high-tuition, high-aid" model. Its logic is neoliberal with a small dash of progressive principles. On the one hand it monetizes higher education in the neoliberal market model. But on the other hand it addresses the issue that higher education generates largely private benefits. In the new model, high-aid supposedly ensures that no one with talent is excluded on the basis of ability to pay, but it has played out badly through student debt and proliferation of fly-by-night for-profit colleges. The general state subsidy has been reduced sharply over the past twenty years. The shift to the new model provides a marked contrast to the

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<sup>4</sup> The disparities are even more marked among districts across the nation and within states. Boston and New York City spend about \$20,000 per pupil, whereas Jordan, Utah, and a couple of Texas districts spend less than \$6000. In Illinois (the author's home state) the average expenditure per district is about \$12000 but the 10 top-spending districts (mostly in the Chicago metropolitan area) spend more than \$20,000 while the lowest ones spend about \$6000.

typically European model of high-subsidies and low tuition which has been maintained by elected officials and mass mobilizations in the face of neoliberal proposals.

### **Can The System Be Reformed?**

- The Search for National Standards: From No Child Left Behind to the Common Core.

One of the most radical and disastrous efforts to set national standards of achievement emanated from a surprising source—the George W. Bush administration and the No Child Left Behind policy, passed as an act of Congress in 2001. The act mandated that states develop standards for assessing basic skills, adopt annual testing procedures, and replace “unqualified teachers,” and that all public schools receiving federal aid participate in the assessment. The design of the program was largely punitive. Schools that failed to meet standards were subjected to an annually escalating series of measures such as being forced to offer tutoring and transfer options after the third year of failure; by the fourth year, they risked the firing and replacement of staff. By the fifth year the school could be shut down entirely. The standards were to be imposed for all youngsters with the aim of 100% proficiency by 2014, and no attention was given to differences in the needs of students, whether as the result of racial achievement gaps, poverty, or disabilities. Only 10 states made an effort to test non-English speaking students in their native language (in effect, Spanish), so that children who were in the process of learning English were classified as lacking reading and math skills regardless of their facility in their native language. Emphasis was almost entirely on an absolute level of basic skill achievement for all the students in the system, rather than on an attempt to measure progress or value-added goals (measuring improvement of outcomes for youngsters that began at below-standard levels).

The results were disastrous. Schools were punished for failing to meet their states’ standards but in a fiscal climate of war spending and budget cuts they received few resources to help them reach youngsters with deficiencies in basic skills. Known remedies, such as drastically reducing class sizes and hiring more teachers and support staff, could have been useful measures but were rarely funded. Instead, states responded by lowering the test standards to reduce the volume of school failures. Local school districts engaged in deceptive practices designed to keep problem students out of testing and in the most egregious cases they simply cheated. For example, in Atlanta, teachers were compelled by administrators to use erasers and pencils to alter test results. But harm was done at a more fundamental level: education became increasingly test preparation. Teachers had to “teach to the test” and students were endlessly drilled on fragmented testable bits of “knowledge.” Art, music, sports, and even academic electives were eliminated to make time for test prep.

In a strange way, NCLB was a progressive and painfully necessary measure. The United States had for two centuries tolerated and even fostered a situation in which some children—especially African American and Latino children—had not acquired basic reading and math skills. It was

indeed time to reveal and remedy these glaring inequalities and deficiencies. Unfortunately, the NCLB remedy was not only inadequate but created a host of unintended negative consequences.

By the time of the Obama presidency, NCLB was gradually abandoned, though its poisonous legacy of constant testing persisted. A new, more sophisticated effort to create national standards was developed with support from the National Governors Association and the Obama administration: The Common Core State Standards. These focused on more intellectually challenging outcomes in language skills and math; they incentivized reading outstanding works in English and world literature (such as Ovid, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Poe and Hawthorne, and contemporary writers) and encouraged conceptual thinking in math. Not all states signed on to these standards; the list of hold-outs reveals the usual reluctance of conservative Southern and rural states to be engaged in the search for uniform goals—Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, Alaska, Nebraska, Indiana, and South Carolina. Several major problems persist: How is attainment of the standards to be assessed? What percentage of students must or should attain these standards and how is failure of individuals, schools, and states to be interpreted and remedied? And how is the cost of meeting the standards to be paid?

- School Choice and a New Labor Force in Teaching

A second set of reforms remains highly decentralized and is composed of efforts in many school districts to change the way the school system is organized. Currently the underlying policies are largely neoliberal in the form of “school choice” and market-like options in public education. An initial effort was the proliferation of magnet schools and special academies, starting in the 1980s. These schools remained staffed by unionized teachers, but they catered to specific categories of students and were generally selective in their admissions. They were in part responses to the reality that white parents perceived majority-African American schools to be academically under-performing and possibly dangerous and would not send their children to public schools unless academically challenging programs were offered and enrollment was carefully controlled. So the magnet schools functioned to retain the shrinking numbers of white and/or middle-class students in the public school systems, while the majority of schools in the district continued to struggle with the status quo of limited resources and the presence of many low-income youngsters in need of additional support. The options of selective school enrollment, magnet programs, and “school choice” are continuing to expand alternatives within school systems, and parents who are “smart consumers” in urban school systems can send their children to the better schools within a district or even across district lines.

But in recent years, new structures are being designed by school administrators who are often closely linked to the mayor’s office and committed to a neoliberal vision in which cities are managed by business elites and hierarchically organized in keeping with a corporate model of power. For example, in Chicago, the top tier of decision-makers in the public school system (school board and school superintendent) is appointed by the mayor.

A major goal of the new policies is limiting the power of teachers' unions, and establishing charter schools within the public system is one of the key mechanisms for doing so. Sometimes the charter school initiatives are coupled with the closing of "under-utilized" or "failing schools" as in the case of the recent closing of 50 schools in predominantly African American neighborhoods in Chicago. Public schools coping with a lack of resources to address the needs of low-income students are defined as "failing" in test performance; and when data can be produced that show a declining number of children in a district, the schools are easily labeled as under-utilized as well. They are closed down, and then re-opened or rebuilt as charter schools run by various non-profit or even profit-making entities with connections to the mayor or the school board. Once public schools are closed, the unionized staffs are laid off and replaced with a new work force. In the case of Chicago schools, the new teaching force is significantly whiter and younger than the unionized teachers<sup>5</sup>.

Very lively discussions are taking place about the accomplishments and failures of charter schools; some are effective, but at the cost of not accepting poorly-prepared applicants. Others show test outcomes that are no better than those of the regular public schools<sup>6</sup>.

In some districts (such as Baton Rouge, Louisiana), the apparent lack of qualified teachers--itself a highly constructed definition of a situation-- is remedied by the importation of teachers on work-related H-1B visas (from the Philippines and elsewhere) who then constitute a qualified and eager labor force rendered docile by their precarious immigration status.

- School-finance reform (SFR)

A third way of addressing the disparities and deficiencies in the U.S. education system is to alter the school funding formula, forcing states to pay a larger share of the bill while reducing the weight of local property taxes which is a cause of the huge funding disparities discussed previously. Like so many reforms in U.S. society, SFR is driven by litigation. As early as the 1970s suits were brought in state courts to compel states to achieve more equity in school financing. But by the last decade of the century, a number of state courts ruled that the state must meet standards of adequacy set in the state constitution, aiming to set a basic floor in district

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<sup>5</sup> A "revolving door" circulates influential individuals through public school administration, charter-school organizations, and profit-making companies in the growing "education-industrial complex." In the case of Chicago, these connections involved bribes, and the school superintendent was forced to resign and then plead guilty in federal court; more commonly the interlocks are instances of cronyism and shared interests rather than outright fraud.

<sup>6</sup> Some of these debates reflect the larger problem of reliable metrics for measuring school performance. Apart from the blatant cheating on standardized tests mentioned above, school systems can "fudge" outcomes in various ways, such as re-classifying their high school dropouts (school leavers) as "transfers" out of the district, a charge now leveled against the Chicago Public School system which has tried to remedy its alarming drop-out rate (especially among young African American men) by near-automatic promotions for freshmen as well as the fudged "transfer" statistic.

expenditures. Many states therefore pursued this objective of adequacy, and a smaller number also pursued equalization, providing additional funds for poorer districts or for schools with a high percentage of students in poverty. As is always the case in the United States, a welter of different standards and formulas emerged in the SFR process: in some states, nothing at all happened, in others genuine help was extended to poorer districts, and in others (such as California) the formula resulted in a “leveling down” and lower school expenditures across the state. There are some studies that suggest that if increases in per pupil expenditures in poorer districts are raised by 20% or more, the outcomes for poorer children are significantly better in terms of school completion and future earnings.

- Easing the High School-to-College Transition

As mentioned above, Americans are increasingly turning to college education as a remedy for deficiencies in the high school (and even elementary school) systems that leave young people with inadequate skills in literacy and numeracy. A much larger percentage of the young age cohort population is now attending college than ever before, and hopes for a well-educated labor force are focusing on institutions of post-secondary education. In this area there is a mix of promising signs and sources of frustration.

The promising signs include rising college attendance and a growing awareness that education beyond secondary school is absolutely necessary for entry into a global, high-tech labor force. But the responses are not always effective in the context of the US education system.

About 13% of college students attend the expanding sector of for-profit institutions, and they are disproportionately African American and from working-class families. These institutions promise vocationally-oriented programs (for instance, computer- and business-related degrees). Their 6-year graduation rates are 31%, compared with 57% at public institutions and 66% at private non-profit colleges and universities. The specialized tech programs are often taught with little rigor by poorly paid part-time instructors. The skills quickly become outdated in the labor market, leaving the degree-holders with enormous student-loan debt and generating an exceptionally high default rate. In the Midwest the federal government forced a couple of for-profit institutions to pay compensation to students who had been fraudulently recruited.

Meanwhile even traditional non-profit institutions have seen disappointing incomes and labor market results for their graduates after the crash of 2008, and student-loan debt has become a large component of household debt for many young Americans. Touted as a way of staying in or entering the middle-class, college has turned out to be disappointing for many.

In an effort to improve the match between college realities and dreams of upward mobility, the Obama administration launched Operation Scorecard, a data collection project designed to improve information on metrics such as graduation rates, debt levels and loan repayment, and

student earnings after college attendance, as well as the family income of students. Although the data are drawn from about 4000 institutions, they pertain only to students receiving federal aid and thus over-represent lower-income students. These data more or less coincide with findings from the US Census Bureau American Community Survey that college attenders (whether they graduated or not) earn on average about \$46000-\$49000 ten years later—an income that is above that of non-college attenders, but hardly a road to riches.

A more recent initiative of the Obama administration is to make tuition at community colleges free, and although it has not yet been passed in Congress, a number of states are pursuing it on their own, since community college education is generally a state and/or local service. This effort is related to a broader vision for community colleges, that they could be the incubator for up-to-date and effective vocational and technical education as well as an inexpensive foundation for transfer to four-year institutions. The current statistics are not particularly heartening—nationwide only 20% of students at CCs obtain a degree after three years and only 40% within six years. Even so, community colleges may be a promising site for offering the high-tech training that high schools have generally not provided and for creating alternative pathways to satisfying and well-paying jobs.

### **Conclusion**

College attendance by an ever-increasing proportion of the age cohort is probably on the whole a positive development. In a peculiar and unplanned way it can contribute to a higher and more uniform level of skills and knowledge as young people move out of very limited local environments and enter a larger realm of discourse and experience. Efforts to ease the enormous burden of tuition in public institutions (let alone private colleges and universities) are to be welcomed. The Obama administration is probably realistic in seeing these efforts as the most feasible solution to the problems of education in the United States, as a “royal road” that bypasses the Herculean labor of reforming the 14,000 extremely diverse, uneven, and uncoordinated state and local school districts. Meanwhile creation of more technical and vocational options is a healthy goal, but these technical-vocational paths to inherently satisfying and well-paying jobs are also haphazardly implemented in comparison to a country such as Germany.

The U.S. educational system is marked by the same issues as U.S. society as a whole. The U.S. political system was deliberately designed to slow change and block policies of equality, and it is decentralized to an extent that many observers would consider dysfunctional for a modern society. These characteristics of political and social structure present major obstacles to educational reform, so that an effective and egalitarian system of schooling is not likely to emerge very quickly.

