

# High-Need Schools

## Changing the Dialogue

Devin Thornburg and  
Anne M. Mungai (Eds.)



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*Changing the Dialogue*

*Edited by*

**Devin Thornburg and Anne M. Mungai**

*Adelphi University, USA*



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LIESBETH BREEK

## FOREWORD

This book is about school and educational reforms in high-need schools from a national as well as international perspective. In this foreword I will talk about my “personal reform” in relation to our national education reform in the Netherlands in recent decades. Parallel reforms have taken place in such countries as the United States, Scandinavia, England, and Australia.

My career as a teacher of French language and literature began in the 1990s. Education, specifically working with students aged twelve to nineteen, was my calling. I have garnered experience at secondary schools, in both wealthy and poor neighborhoods, in and around the capital city of Amsterdam. These schools are distinguished by their educational vision, the competence of the management, and the technological and facilities resources they offer pupils and teachers alike.

In the first ten years of my career in education I taught classes that emphasized cultural transmission, learning to form opinions and basic thinking skills. Sparked by literary movements, we had spirited class discussions about the difference between naturalism and existentialism. Is a person’s fate sealed at birth or is the ability to make choices and define oneself through them a fundamental right of human beings?

At the time, in teaching my subject—the French language—I focused primarily on fostering personal development and reflecting on traditions. School instills values, and as such plays a vital role in society. It is precisely here that the strength of my profession lies. What motivates me as a teacher? Offering tools to young people on their way to adulthood. To help them celebrate life, to give them the courage to be resilient in the world.

Throughout my career in education I have been guided by the question “What do you want the children we are teaching in our schools to be like as adults?” (Ritchhard, 2015, p. 16) In my early days as a teacher I judged each student on his or her unique value and in no way, on no level, did I occupy myself with comparisons between them.

The past twenty years, however, have seen a gradual shift: increasingly, educational outcomes have found their way onto ranked lists at various levels: school, national, international. The success of a school, and with it the role of the teacher, was measured by where it stood on these lists. The dropping PISA scores in our country became the cause célèbre of our educational policymakers. School management teams, as a result, took to using such terms as “results-focused work,” “evidence-based teaching,” “accountability,” “closing the gap,” and “efficiency.” In

principle I am not opposed to testing: Some tests, such as the one given to students at the conclusion of elementary school that determined which secondary school level they would be placed in, proved their worth; they ensured that higher education was accessible to all levels of society, not just to the children of well-educated, well-to-do parents.

But in recent decades, education has increasingly become a production line of test scores, protocols, ranked lists—at the expense of its role in student development. The constant pressure to produce quantifiable results in this oppressive education climate began to make me uneasy. I sensed that I was drifting away from my original motivation for becoming a teacher, which was to chaperone young people into their personhood and help them develop a capacity for independent thought. But it wasn't only in myself that I detected a diminished focus on creativity and critical thinking; I saw it in my colleagues as well. In this new educational order, literature-based programs were also marginalized in favor of the standardized curriculum.

We were drifting away from the essential questions: What constitutes good education, what do we want to achieve and what is the purpose of education? The pedagogical dimension of thinking of education as an existential process was receding into the background. With teachers, education shifted increasingly in the direction of teaching to the test, which in students was inextricably linked to “learning to” the test. Those things that were not tested were, by virtue of the fact, not important. This top-down accountability, I was certain, caused more harm than good. It was during this disenchanting period that I became acquainted with the work of education pedagogue Professor Gert Biesta, senior lecturer at Brunel University, London.

His books *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Biesta, 2014) and *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (Biesta, 2010) spoke to my feeling of dissatisfaction and opened my eyes to what had gradually happened to me as a teacher. Reading his work felt like a liberation. Professor Biesta divides education into three domains.

The *qualification* domain refers to knowledge and skills (specific, broad and general).

The *subjectification* domain refers to the process of becoming a subject (responsible, compassionate).

The *socialization* domain concerns the many ways in which education makes us part of social, cultural and political “orders.”

Good teachers continually ask themselves what they want to achieve in each of these domains and manage to strike a balance between them. The primary questions should be: What do you want your pupils to achieve in each domain? How do you as a teacher maintain a meaningful balance between the domains?

Obviously the emphasis will fluctuate. Just before the national exams it will be more on the domain of qualification. During a period of social unrest, as after a terrorist attack, the domain of subjectification will be more central. But in the end, meaningful and good instruction always seeks an equilibrium between the three domains. Our education was out of balance and tended to be reduced to a single domain, the qualification domain, because the national government maintained a

one-sided perspective on the quantifiable. And yet I am convinced that the most crucial outcomes of education cannot always be measured.

And what about my personal educational reform in relation to the national reforms described by Dick van der Wateren in the narrative that follows mine in this foreword?

For years I allowed myself to be increasingly backed into the qualification domain, at the expense of socialization and subjectification. If nothing else, education is about making knowledge and skills one's own, let there be no doubt about that. But meaningful education is about more than the objective transfer of knowledge—it is about opening experiences and meanings, and for many pupils, school is the only place that offers such pivotal experiences. Professor Biesta rightly refers to school as a practice arena for society; a place between home and the wide world that allows for practice. The purpose of education is to make students feel at home in the world. That realm that contains the essence of education—literature, for instance, with its transformative powers—is being crushed by an overemphasis on measurement. And it is precisely this transformative power that defies measurement. In a time in which terrorist attacks and social unrest make up a part of our daily spectrum, it is the fundamental and necessary job of education to reflect, together with students, on who we are, where we stand and what makes up our collective memory.

Let teachers continually ask themselves what they want to reach with their teaching and schooling, and demand this professional space for themselves. Teachers are essential; they are at the heart of education. The meeting between pupil and teacher is crucial. It is through the dialogue between teacher and student that a child's development is initiated, that the child gains access to the world.

You can only exercise the profession of teacher if you care about your pupils. And this love of children always goes hand in hand with a love of the world. It is through dialogue—a request made of the pupil, a teacher offering ways of thinking through subject matter, a sharing of experiences—that a child and the world are brought together. If this dialogue takes the form of a shared intellectual undertaking, a pact between teacher and student, then it will help students to emerge in the world with a grown-up sensibility, a sense of responsibility, of empathy.

I hope that our schooling teaches students to develop perspective, to stand in another's shoes, brings them in contact with that which lies outside themselves. I hope that our education helps them bear responsibility, *want to* bear responsibility, for what they will be bringing into the world.

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DICK VAN DER WATEREN

## FOREWORD

This book appeals to me in multiple ways: first, in the way it addresses the problems faced by high-need schools; and second, in its strong focus on teachers' agency to find solutions for these problems.

In this contribution I wish to make two points that grew out of the idea of a “flipped education system” (Evers & Kneyber, 2015). The first is about developing a new curriculum. The second has to do with evaluating what is going on in schools, accounting for the results of putting the curriculum into practice. I argue that in both processes teachers should take the lead.

In her foreword to this book, Liesbeth Breek, following Gert Biesta (2014), indicated that good education strives for a balance between three domains—qualification, socialization and subjectification—which makes education a multidimensional effort. In Biesta's work, education and democracy are strongly linked (see also Biesta 2011 & Biesta et al. 2006, 2009). Biesta states that the goal of good education is to help young people grow up to become independent, critical and responsible adults in a democratic society.

Good education, then, is more than just teaching knowledge and skills. While those are necessary for adults to function in a democracy, good education is also about values and how to develop from a self-centered person to a person who cares for others and for the world.

This is precisely the challenge for teachers in high-need schools. They, even more than teachers in “normal” schools, need to be not just competent but good, or *virtuoso*. Biesta (2015), in a paper on teacher education, defines *educational virtuosity* as:

“Embodied educational wisdom: the embodied ability to make wise educational judgements about what is to be done; that is, about what is educationally desirable.”

While it goes without saying that teachers need to be competent, undue focus on competence undermines teachers' professional agency with its insistence on performance, standards measurement and control (Biesta, 2015), a point made in this book as well. Moreover, as Biesta underscores:

“Competencies are always orientated toward the past and the present; it is, after all, only possible to describe what a teacher needs to be competent at in relation to situations that are already known. Yet teaching is in a very fundamental sense always open to the future.”

Therefore, a virtuoso teacher needs to develop her or his judgement “about what is an educationally desirable course of action in *this* concrete situation, with *these*

concrete students at *this* particular stage in their educational trajectory” (Biesta, 2015). This book offers various examples of when and where judgement and educational virtuosity are required in high-need schools.

With these ideas in mind, let us turn to the question of how to engage in flipping the system—“changing education from the ground up” (Kneyber & Evers 2015)—in our daily teaching practice.

My first point is that teachers should be responsible for the design of the curriculum. The content of our education, the “why” and the “what,” should not be left entirely to policymakers or schoolbook publishers, as is the case in most schools in the Netherlands. The publication of a pioneering volume of papers by Dutch educators Kneyber and Evers in 2013—fore-runner of the international volume *Flip the System* (Kneyber & Evers 2015)—had a great impact on Dutch education policy. Most parties in the House of Representatives adopted ideas developed in the book, notably the concept that teachers should have a greater say in and responsibility for what goes on in schools, a concept known as *collective autonomy*.

In 2014, a nationwide discussion was started by our Secretary of Education, Culture and Science to develop a national curriculum for primary and secondary education. The discussion resulted in a report, *Our Education 2032* (in Dutch: *Ons Onderwijs 2032*). The report’s title refers to children who are currently starting primary school. These youngsters will finish secondary school in 2032 and either find a job or embark upon higher education. The report includes many of the elements I discussed at the start of this paper, e.g. a stronger focus on socialization and subjectification, but the discussion about the new curriculum is not yet over.

A group of teachers (myself included) strongly advocate giving teachers the lead in curriculum design. First we need to develop a clear vision of an education that prepares young people for their role in a complex world and looks beyond the necessary knowledge and skills. Second, we need to end the division between responsibilities for educational content and method, the “what” and the “how.” What we teach (primarily decided at state and government levels) immediately has consequences for how we teach (primarily decided at the local level) and vice versa. Because they know what works, teachers should direct the process of curriculum development and not leave that to “experts” and policymakers.

A long-term vision and core curriculum, therefore, need to be developed in the coming years, supervised by a national teachers’ council representing the various teacher networks. Teacher design teams are responsible for the development and implementation of the curriculum in their own schools. Regular feedback travels between local teams, the teacher council and elsewhere in the network. We are still working to realize this structure and it may be years before the system operates in all of our schools. In the meantime, there are many similar initiatives on a local and regional level that are remarkably successful.

My second point is directly related to the first. It is the question of how to ensure that local and national education goals are met, with a healthy balance between those

results that can be measured (e.g. reading, writing, math) and those that cannot (e.g. responsibility, creativity, caring, a critical attitude), and a focus on trust rather than accountability. Again, teachers should make up the lead.

Ideally, school self-evaluation will be integrated with curriculum development. Evaluation of progress and results is a natural part of the work by teacher design and development teams. This model provides an answer, also to the problem of teacher professionalisation usually following a “top-down” approach (identified in the chapter “Teachers in High-Need School Reform” in this book). Teacher teams involved in developing the curriculum and regularly assessing their progress will quite naturally feel the need for their own professional development and require very little encouragement by school leaders. They will be able to indicate exactly what kind of courses and workshops are helpful at the time and whether or not they need outside expertise.

It will be clear by now that integration of curriculum development and the evaluation of education results at the local level can be instrumental in teacher professionalisation. At the same time, since they are party in the discussion about the curriculum and the evaluation of school results, students will benefit.

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CARL MIRRA

## 1. THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES ARE ACCOUNTING STRAITJACKETS

*A Very Brief History of Federal School Reform and the  
Rise of Accountability, 1965–2015*

It would be extremely naïve to expect the dominant classes to develop a type of education that would enable subordinate classes to perceive social injustices critically.

(Freire, 1985, p. 102)

The year 2015 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Bold legislation followed President Lyndon Baines Johnson's (LBJ) well-known 1964 State of the Union Address, where the former schoolteacher declared an "unconditional war on poverty" as part of his Great Society mandates. Johnson pledged to improve the quality of teachers and schools, while bemoaning that some 20 percent of children lived in poverty. Many landmark and valuable bills were passed at the time, but poverty and inequity persists in the U.S. In 1964, 23 percent of children lived in poverty; in 2012, it was nearly 22 percent (Children's Defense Fund, 2014). Equally staggering is that nearly half of all schoolchildren in the U.S. received reduced-price or free lunch in 2011, and a majority of public schoolchildren in Southern states are from low-income families (Layton, 2013). Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) provides anecdotal accounts of the daily distress faced by America's poorest schoolchildren that bring this data to life. He tells of underprivileged children attending school hungry; sitting in class for extended periods with toothaches; and eating in cafeterias where floors are soaked in sewage. While the U.S. has the second worst child-poverty rates in the industrialized world, it boasts the most billionaires and largest prison population (Children's Defense Fund, 2014).

It should be noted at the outset that this structural inequality and wealth disparity are among the reasons why federal reform efforts fall short. Many of these programs fail to address the root causes of poverty, and remain largely disconnected from the lives of the poor. This is not to say school reform is without merit, but the larger forces driving school reform do little to genuinely address these structural impediments.

However, the purpose of this chapter is to (very) briefly sketch the major educational reform efforts of the federal government over the past half-century. These efforts gradually increased what critics call punitive testing and accountability

as a means to improve schools and close the achievement gap. The achievement gap refers to the discrepancy in student performance and graduation rates based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The chapter title borrows from the California Federation of Teachers' description of the rising federal accountability movement in its early stages as an "accounting straitjacket," indicating continuity between past and current concerns over testing and tabulating (Kirst, 1975, p. 536). The brief history of the federal movement toward increased educational accountability presented here helps to illustrate that its lack of success, as Amrein-Beardsley so aptly puts it, is "due in part to a lack of accountability to its own history" (Amrein-Beardsley, 2014, p. 16). Many of the chapters in this book examine local strategies for reform. This chapter explores the wider context in which those efforts occur.

### REFORM OR TRANSFORM?

Current reform efforts, when placed in a broader historical context, reveal a trend of top-down reform (federal and state bodies that sit outside and above local districts) in standards-based accountability. The accountability movement, what some call test-based or performance-based accountability, centers on standardized testing as the most significant barometer of student and school achievement. Performance-based reform has been incremental since at least 1965, but now dominates U.S. schooling. It has become the guiding narrative, the "big idea" that steers almost all reform efforts in the nation. Testing, rather than curriculum and teaching, has become an end in itself (Ravitch, 2010, p. 12). Any school reform effort worth pursuing must be a long-term endeavor, and one devoted to undermining the prevailing orthodoxy about testing, "value-added" models, and the system that promotes these forms of social control.

To avoid misunderstanding: I am not deriding standards and all forms of testing. All effective teachers must establish high standards. The problem is *standardization*, narrow evaluation measures, and the invalid application of testing results. The current fixation with standardized testing as the almost sole vehicle of closing the achievement gap and evaluating student growth evolved from earlier, failed reforms.

Part of the problem is what Elmore calls "cargo-cult reform". Too often, reform initiatives, and teacher behavior, are devoid of a sense of agency, while lacking clear connections to what impacts student learning (Elmore, 2002a). Federal education policy, while sometimes well-intentioned, exacerbates this problem. It also frustrates viable school reform movements. There are many documented alternative reform movements that are not centered on unproven standardization and testing (Warren & Mapp, 2011; Apple & Beane, 2007). Warren and Mapp have outlined community organizing strategies that empower parents, students, and local citizens to couple school reform with wider community social-justice actions. Examples of these bottom-up efforts include the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition in New York City; the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago; Southern Echo in the Mississippi Delta; Padres y Jovenes Unidos in Denver; One LA-IAF

in Los Angeles; and People Acting in Community Together (PACT) in San Jose, California. These groups help to build organizing traditions rather than piecemeal reforms (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Such movements focus on bringing agency to parents and students as well as teachers and administrators, or proceed from the “inside out,” as Tyack and Cuban put it. If recent history teaches us anything, it teaches us that successful reform starts with local needs and concerns, and “enlists the support of teachers as key actors in reform” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 10).

Under federal and state education reform, school personnel rarely feel empowered to change or impact the organizational structure in which they work (Elmore, 2002, p. 24). The “grammar of schooling,” or long-standing organizational forms that shape U.S. education, is one major culprit in upholding these structures (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 85). Again, equally culpable are top-down reform efforts that erode teacher and community agency. Without a priority on genuine human agency, schools are doomed to pursue a cycle of “cargo cult” reform, engaged in “symbolic activities” that do more to satisfy legislative mandates than to help disenfranchised and disempowered students (Elmore, 2002a, pp. 22–25).

Even the involvement of teachers, students, and parents is inadequate if it does not aspire to produce lasting, sustainable change that addresses issues of centuries-long economic and educational inequity. Educators associated with critical pedagogy have tirelessly argued that school systems reproduce the inequities of the existing system. Federal, state, and elite foundations often provide the funding for school reform efforts. The allocation of funds is frequently attached to a predetermined agenda, and one formulated by powerful politicians or wealthy corporate executives who have little, if any, incentive to transform existing inequities. Hence, it is suggested here that school reform efforts linked to top-down funding and mandates are at risk of reproducing the very problems they seek to ameliorate. That five decades of school reform have failed to end poverty or close the achievement gap warrants deeper scrutiny regarding current reform efforts. This is not to say that top-down approaches funded by large bureaucratic entities are always troublesome.<sup>1</sup> Schools and individual students may indeed experience sporadic success. A healthy democracy starts with equal access to a quality education; but opportunity and access to quality schooling remain an elusive dream for America's poorest citizens.

#### ESEA 1965: MOVING TOWARD ACCOUNTABILITY

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was the federal government's first major step toward its substantial involvement in school reform. Its defining feature was Title I, which offered federal aid to “educationally deprived children.” The other titles dealt with libraries and textbooks; support for local initiatives; research and more funding for state departments of education, the latter of which was included in part to dispel charges of overreach by the federal government (Jeffrey, 1978). Consider that the Constitution does not allow the federal government to dictate curricular reform (Ravitch, 2010). Sensitive to debates over federal intervention in

U.S. politics, the ESEA authors acknowledged that the federal government was not permitted to “exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration...or selection of any instructional materials in any educational institution” (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 52). Indeed, ESEA’s unsteady implementation was largely left to states and local districts.

At the federal level, the Supreme Court has influenced school policy through landmark decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Congress also produces legislation, including education laws. Congressional representatives serve on behalf of populations of a particular state. It is fair to say that federal and state education policies are inseparable. The federal government frequently issues guidelines, but the specificity of mandates is normally left to the states, which are best understood as what researchers call subnational entities (New York State Education Department, 2009; Sunderman, 2010). This does not mean that the federal government never passes legislation independent of state desires. The ESEA of 1965 was largely a federal effort designed to fix schools at the state level that were seen as inadequately addressing the needs of disadvantaged students.

The turbulence of the 1960s thrust politicians into action. A massive civil rights movement, urban rebellions and the seemingly sudden emergence of antiestablishment politics spread across the nation. LBJ’s talk of fighting poverty and fostering equality is inseparable from these bottom-up actions. The Civil Rights Movement motivated LBJ and Congress to pass progressive legislation such as the ESEA, but the government’s goal was to reform and conserve the existing system, not to transform it. On the other hand, local authorities frequently spurned federal laws, especially in the South. Denying voting rights and access to education were among the many abuses of the day. This contradictory and contentious context animated some of the debates over the implementation of ESEA. Federal reformers, unsettled by widespread protest against the “system,” sought to halt some of the country’s worst abuses, but they did not seek to altogether transform the system that created these problems in the first place (Zinn, 1965).

The original ESEA was passed in a Democratic-majority Congress. Many politicians, but hardly all, agreed that the federal government needed to allocate funds for underprivileged students. Senator Robert F. Kennedy feared that after schools received funding, they might mishandle it and make little progress. Schools themselves contributed to inequality, according to Kennedy. Charges of corruption, mismanagement, and money going to suburban districts that had few low-income students would confirm at least some of Kennedy’s worries. “Putting money into a school system which itself created the problem,” Kennedy bemoaned, was wasteful and misguided. The ESEA would prove ineffective “unless there is a meaningful... program...which is tested and checked” (Jeffrey, 1978, p. 85).

The iconic Senator proposed an evaluation system whereby funding would be tied to measurable results. Kennedy declared that he would not back the bill unless an evaluation provision was included. “I wonder,” Kennedy ruminated, if accountability could be obtained “through some testing system” (McLaughlin,

1974, p. 3). Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, in what was then called the U.S. Office of Education, agreed that an accountability mandate was needed (McLaughlin, 1974, p. 4). The new laws compelled school districts to inform state departments of education regarding student achievement. What differed from earlier federal education plans, the *Harvard Education Letter* reports, was that “this provision called for the public display and disclosure of information which schoolmen knew could be used against them in the enforcement of new priorities” (Murphy, 1971, p. 55).

Kennedy did not hesitate to promote federal intervention to *reform* local schools. He was more reluctant to use federal power to protect Civil Rights workers during his time as U.S. Attorney General from 1961–64. Organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) embraced transformative politics. They also worked courageously throughout the segregated South, having been subjected to brutality and outright murder. Civil Rights workers pleaded with the Justice Department for protection against corrupt local police, who often were the perpetrators of violence against Black citizens for simply asserting their basic rights. Kennedy’s lukewarm, inconsistent response to protect African-Americans/Black people from racist attacks led to a lawsuit, *Moses v. Kennedy*, in 1963 (Zinn, 1965). That same year, a House of Representatives subcommittee drafted a bill that included a section to bolster federal authority to protect against law enforcement violence in the South. Kennedy opposed that provision, and it was dropped (Zinn, 1964). The point here is not to take a back-handed swipe at Kennedy or to present him as entirely responsible for educational accountability, but to demonstrate how his stance is paradigmatic of federal school reformers: it is safe to intervene where the system can be conserved, but not in circumstances that may unsettle or transform the status quo.

Kennedy and the reformers did play a salient part in advancing the federal role in education and the accountability movement. Shepard (2008) suggests that Kennedy’s intention was “almost identical to present-day accountability rhetoric” (Ryan & Shepard, pp. 26–27). Perhaps, but the accountability measures envisioned in the mid-to-late 1960s were more “low stakes” insofar as they did not compel states to use standardized exams or follow singular reporting criteria (McLaughlin, 1974, p. 18). Data decisions about individual teachers and students were not mandated, unlike today. And Kennedy’s concerns about the mismanagement of funds were not unfounded. The lack of Congressional supervision led to money being used for students who were not among those identified in Title I of the law (Thomas & Brady, 2005).

Of special importance is that legislators concerned about “wasting” Title I money had their initial efforts extended by the rather bureaucratic-sounding Planning Programming Budget System (PPBS) that was adopted by several states in the years following the original ESEA. Then-U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was enamored with PPBS, a statistical analysis that permitted him to control defense spending. McNamara implemented it across the Department of

Defense in his quest to quantify the military's actions. McNamara and his policy "whiz kids" formulated planning decisions largely based on numerical data. In 1965, when the Vietnam War was escalating but not yet the disaster it is remembered as today, LBJ instructed civilian government agencies to implement PPBS. Gradually, several state education agencies required PPBS of school districts (Hughes, 1975, p. 58; Wright, 2012; Shapley, n.d.). The *Phi Delta Kappan* journal reported that the PPBS movement was a "national wave" of accountability, but its many flaws led educators in an "effort to restrain [its] momentum" (Kirst, 1975, p. 537; Hughes, 1975, p. 58).

PPBS was very much a top-down system of evaluation. A 1968 paper prepared for the Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations in the U.S. Senate explains that PPBS is "a splendid tool to help top management make decisions." It "works best for an aggressive master," and in the absence of a master PPBS will fail to produce results (Schelling, 1968, p. 27). While foreign policy analysts championed PPBS, it was met with resistance by many educators. California, for instance, was engaged in PPBS pilot programs in 1968, and by 1972 it was voted down. Republican assemblyman Robert H. Burke was one of the more strident opponents in the lead-up to the debate over PPBS in California. His office published a report on PPBS, and in overstated tones bemoans:

This organizational system has guidelines which have to be followed, methods for reporting progress and accomplishments...It appears that only those tools which are considered useful to the "elite" remain...this instrument of thought control and societal management to further their own aims, this entire concept of "educational management" takes on a dangerous dimension...The entire system has become a "people control mechanism" (Burke, 1971, p. 8; Thompson, 2014).

It was in this context that the California Federation of Teachers called the accountability movement an "accounting straitjacket," having indicated that they too felt controlled by an "aggressive master" (Kirk, 1975; Hughes, 1975). That the ESEA allowed for the adoption of technocratic, militarized instruments to measure educational outcomes might be exaggerated, but it is still a bit alarming. The logical, or perhaps illogical, extension of war manager McNamara's statistical analysis was the policy of attrition and body counts in Vietnam. Tabulating and recording the number of enemy killed was seen as a strategy to help win the war. It instead contributed to atrocities and abuses in what is now a national blemish; hard data and numbers provided the "illusion of control," but ultimately became a "doctrine of atrocity" (Appy, 1993, pp. 157–159). Has the attempt to control and measure schools, teachers, and students since 1965 led to "body counts" of the nation's most vulnerable children? As one of the planners of ESEA sums up the legislation, it "began crudely the educational accountability movement with its emphasis on measuring...in the absence of tested experimental models" (Halperin, 1975, p. 8). Legislation in 1965 then set in motion the movement that now dominates education policy.

As the U.S. tumbled deeper into the Vietnam conflict, the government's attention focused more on the war against Communism than the war on poverty. In fact, up to 1969 ESEA spending was under \$1.7 billion each year or "about the cost of ten days in Vietnam" (Halperin, 1975, p. 5).

The political strife of the 1960s eventually faded along with the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, but in its aftermath demands for civil rights and equality continued to shape some legislative efforts. Federal involvement in education continued as several noteworthy laws and court decisions appeared. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled against school busing for the purpose of desegregation in *Milliken v. Bradley*, delivering a blow to school integration. *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), however, provided equal educational rights to non-English-speaking students under the "equal protection" clause of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that informed earlier civil rights actions. The Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974) called for, well, equal educational opportunity, having prohibited discrimination based on "race, color, sex or national origin" (Weise & Garcia, 1998, p. 4). In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, later called the Individuals with Disabilities Act, declared free education for all regardless of ability. It also provided for the now well-known "least restrictive environment" and Individual Education Plan (IEP) for all children. Meanwhile, the ESEA was reapproved in 1974. It devoted \$25 million yearly for "planning and evaluation," which "moved American education a giant step down the path of...evaluation" (Halperin, 1975, p. 8). In sum, supporters of the ESEA of 1965 could argue that it was successful insofar as it focused the nation's attention on disadvantaged children, while temporarily thwarting anxieties about federal encroachment in education. Consider that as the 1970s came to a close, President Carter was able to establish the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) with a budget of \$14 billion and a staff of 18,000 (Weisman, 1979).

#### A NATION AT RISK? INCREASING TESTS TO REDUCE THE RISK

A weary public, however, remained jaded by the Vietnam War and the Nixon-era Watergate debacle, all of which eroded public confidence in the federal government. Carter's failure to get American hostages released from Iran in 1979 added to this unease. President Ronald Reagan's cries of "big government" still resonated with the population. Reagan sought to roll back what was useful in ESEA: a concern for the poor and federal responsibility to intervene on behalf of the most vulnerable. The former Hollywood star wished to dismantle the USDOE, reduce federal spending in this area, and increase state control over education (New York State Education Department, 2009).

Reagan's nominal reduction of federal interference found expression in the 1981 reauthorization of the ESEA. Reagan targeted Title I funding in his overarching goal to reduce domestic spending. Public pressure persuaded Congress to maintain some Title I spending initiatives, but many aid programs were indeed consolidated (New York State Education Department, 2009). More importantly, the act eliminated

the specific evaluation criteria outlined under Title I. States and local education agencies were still required to conduct evaluation reports (Darling-Hammond & Marks, 1983). The accountability movement briefly stumbled, but did not fall during Reagan's first term.

Performance-based reform may have briefly faltered in terms of legislation in 1981. But it received a major rhetorical boost from the National Commission on Education, which was established by then-Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell. The group published a belligerent report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). It was a scathing "indictment" of U.S. schools that complained of declining student test scores that eroded the nation's economic competitiveness. With a dash of Cold War rhetorical flair, the report warned that student achievement scores in 1983 were lower than in the late 1950s when the Soviets launched *Sputnik*. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the authors bemoaned, it would be taken as "an act of war" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). Where the U.S. was once losing the space "war," it was now lagging behind on the education front, which amounted to an "unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" (p. 5).

The report formulated a series of recommendations to combat this seemingly dreadful moment. One was that "standardized tests of achievement...should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another" (p. 28). These exams "should be administered as part of a nationwide...system of State and local standardized tests," the commission asserted. The report added that "teacher salaries should be increased...and performance-based" (p. 30).

Ironically, the commission occasionally echoed the same concerns as those who drafted the ESEA of 1965. "We believe the Federal Government's role includes several functions...protecting constitutional rights and civil rights for students and school personnel" (p. 33). It went so far as to promote a vision of federal activism in education, but with caution. The federal government "has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education." Furthermore, it "must provide the leadership to ensure the Nation's...resources are marshaled" to improve education (p. 33). Both federal "intervention" and a concern for civil rights found their way into the report, indicating that these issues were not easily dismissed.

President Reagan urged Americans to listen to the Commission's "findings and recommendations" and expressed his gratitude for its "courage" and "vision." Some Commission members were "flabbergasted," however, when Reagan concluded that the commission's "call for an end to Federal intrusion is consistent with our task of redefining the Federal role in education" (Reagan, 1983; Fiske, 1983, p. B15). As many scholars have pointed out, Reagan was likely using the moment to broadcast his anti-big government platform. Whatever his motive, *A Nation at Risk* was another stride toward standardized testing as reform. Despite its appearance during the Reagan administration, the report favored a heightened role of the federal government in education, albeit in "cooperation with states" (p. 32).

Equally noteworthy was the Congressional reauthorization of the ESEA in 1981. In 1987, the Hawkins-Stafford School Improvements amended ESEA to provide Title I funding, while calling for performance-based measures (New York State Education Department, 2009). Cosponsored by Augustus Hawkins, who presided over a largely minority Los Angeles community, the amendments were a direct call to address the achievement gap (Cohen & Moffit, p. 114). Thomas and Brady (2005) remind us that Title I was modified in 1988 to include standardized testing as a requirement to illustrate student achievement.

The following year George H. Bush entered the White House, and he arranged a National Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1989. The summit brought together the President and the National Governors Association to formulate education policy. Arkansas governor Bill Clinton served as the cochair of the association's task force on education. The president and governors announced their goals in *The New York Times*, articulating both the original impetus for the ESEA and a move toward testing-based accountability. "Federal funds," the officials wrote, "are directed particularly toward services for young people at risk." Mindful of latent fears over federal control, the governors assured that "state and local laws...control what is taught, and how." However, "neither federal nor state and local laws...focus sufficiently on results." Federal and state authorities need the ability to waive some requirements "in return for greater accountability" (Statement by the President and Governors, 1989; New York State Education Department, 2009).

Democrat Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992 and resumed the standards and evaluation goals articulated during his work with President G.H. Bush's summit. Goals 2000: Educate America Act was approved in 1994, and articulated many of the same aims as the 1989 summit. The goals were ambitious and far-reaching. As for its role in testing, Goals 2000 established individual state standards and evaluation systems to measure the success of those standards. ESEA was also reauthorized at this time along with The Improving America's School Act (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 54). Title I now "required states to create performance-based accountability systems for schools" (Elmore, 2002, p. 32).

And Clinton's 1997 State of the Union address, where he outlined his principles for education, again extended the standards- and test-based accountability theme. The first principle entailed "a national crusade for standards:"

Every state and school must shape the curriculum to reflect these standards... To help schools meet the standards and measure their progress, we will lead an effort over the next two years to develop national tests of student achievement in reading and math. ...Every state should adopt high national standards, and by 1999, every state should test every 4th grader in reading and every 8th grader in math to make sure these standards are met. (Clinton, 1997)

Testing-based accountability gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s. It is convenient for some to blame Republicans for this trend, but liberal politicians were equally responsible.

It is no surprise, then, that Clinton's call for increased testing surged in 2002 when newly elected Republican President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law. Many researchers consider it the most wide-reaching federal reform of ESEA since 1965. The legislation mandated "increased accountability" by requiring states to administer annual standardized tests for all students in grades 3 through 8 in reading and math. The scores on these exams were posted in report cards to assess a school's efficacy in meeting the standards, what was called Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) (New York State Education Department, 2009). NCLB demanded that scores be disaggregated by disability, ethnicity, poverty, etc. Failure to meet AYP in any area meant sanctions, from a detailed school improvement plan to restructuring (including the firing of teachers and administrators) to cuts in funding.

This menacing approach to reform did little to improve learning, placed economic burdens on schools, and narrowed the curriculum. Guisbond, Neill, and Schaeffer (2012) argue that NCLB failed to achieve most of its goals, especially in terms of increased test scores, but also in the areas of school choice and dropout rates. NCLB's primary and all-encompassing demand that all students eventually reach proficiency in reading and math not only failed, but it reduced the notion of school reform to test scores. A systematic trend analysis evaluated the effectiveness of NCLB in improving student learning. It used the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) exams that are administered to a sizeable representative sample of 4th and 8th graders across the country. The report concluded that:

NCLB did not have a significant impact on improving reading and math achievement across the nation...the national average achievement remains flat in reading and grows in math at the same pace after NCLB as before. In grade 4 math, there was a temporary improvement right after NCLB, but it was followed by a return to the pre-reform growth rate...[and] has not helped the nation...narrow the achievement gap. (Lee, 2006, pp. 10–11)

While student gains under NCLB are difficult to demonstrate, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) documented the economic strain associated with this underfunded mandate. It figured that states would need to spend up to \$5.3 billion to meet the NCLB directives (Guisbond, Neill, & Schaeffer, 2012). As for impact on instruction, consider that schools spent, and continue to spend, a considerable amount of time administering tests that take away from instructional time as well as approximately 20 to 60 days engaged in test preparation. It is reasonable to add that NCLB intensified student anxiety about testing, increasing the emotional strain on children. Studies have demonstrated that some disadvantaged students spent what amounted to a full year simply taking exams over a twelve-year period (Guisbond, Neill, & Schaeffer, 2012, pp. 4–5).

NCLB's lack of success provided a rhetorical platform for educational reform after Barack Obama catapulted into the White House in 2009. Newly appointed Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made a pitch for the reauthorization of

the ESEA only months after the administration took office. The act was due for reauthorization in 2007 and awaits reapproval as of this writing. Revision was needed, the administration insisted, because NCLB did not advocate “high” learning standards and “unfairly labeled many schools as failures even when they were making real progress.” NCLB focused too heavily on “absolute test scores,” Duncan declared, “rather than student growth” (Duncan, 2009).

Here we see the administration asserting its goal to replace absolute test scores with an even more controversial assessment system based on growth in student achievement. This approach utilizes Value Added Models (VAM), or statistical tools that supposedly isolate and measure a teacher’s impact on student learning. Related to this testing was the desire to create college- and career-ready standards, which was an indirect way of saying the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), to avoid charges of improper federal encroachment in education.

To persuade states to adopt these priorities, the USDOE launched the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grants in 2009 that set aside \$4.35 billion for education as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The “voluntary” grant process required states to cover four domains for this “funding opportunity.” The areas included:

- standards and assessments or “adopting” internationally benchmarked standards to ensure “college and career readiness”;
- new data systems to measure student success, while evaluating teachers and principals;
- increasing teacher effectiveness or what is called “workforce development”; and
- improving the lowest-achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 59836; Manna & Ryan, 2011).

RTTT was introduced during a harsh economic recession, which influenced cash-hungry states to accept the administration’s reform goals. Joanne Weiss, former director of RTTP, acknowledges that the “profound budgetary challenge[s]” for states constituted a “significant inducement” for them to embrace the reforms (Weiss, 2015, p. 57). In fact, “many states...changed laws” and “updated statutes regarding teacher and principal evaluation” to gain funding eligibility (p. 59). In classic top-down fashion, the grant “forced alignment among...the governor, the chief state school officer, and the president of the state board of education” (p. 59). It did not, however, require any agreement from local school administrators or teacher union presidents. It appears that this tactic ensured that local, district-level concerns would not disrupt the grant process.

Two of RTTT’s “assurance areas” that generated intense criticism were the call for common core (read: national) standards and evaluation of teachers using student growth measures. With respect to the Common Core, it was released in June 2010 by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State Officers. The CCSS outlined standards for ELA and math in grades K-12. Note that the NCLB condition that all students in grades 3 through 8 be tested in math and reading remained under the

new plan. Its punishments were eased, but new forms of testing-based accountability emerged. As of this writing, most states have adopted the Common Core.

Critics charged that states were coerced into adopting standards that were not any better than many existing state standards. Those states that agreed to the Common Core were awarded extra points in the RTTT application. A careful analysis conducted by the Congressional Research Service observed that the Education Department “instructed reviewers to assign ‘high points’ to [states] indicating participation in a consortium that was developing the required standards.” In effect, high points were reserved for those who went with the Common Core. As the Congressional Research Service explains, “aside from the Common Core State Standards, there was no other set of standards being developed by a consortium of states that included enough states to meet the criteria to receive ‘high’ points” (Skinner & Feder, 2014, pp. 8–13). A USDOE commissioned study puts it bluntly, “Some Recovery Act programs... have more prescriptive requirements. In these cases, states had to take specified actions, such as adoption of the CCSS” (Webber, Troppe, Milanowski, Gutmann, Reisner, & Goertz, 2014, xiii).

RTTT pushed the adoption of the Common Core, and value-added measures as well. Grant applications needed to address teachers’ impact on student growth. “A particularly important system feature,” a USDOE-sponsored study explains, “is the capacity to link teacher and student data, which is necessary to evaluate educator effectiveness and support performance-based compensation systems” (Webber et al., 2014, p. xvi). This notion of improving teacher efficacy extended NCLB’s “highly effective teacher” provision, but was equally troubling, as we shall see.

When it came time to ease some of the more restrictive elements of NCLB, Duncan again used it as an opportunity to promote the Common Core and value-added models. Duncan (2009) sent a letter to state education leaders to the effect that the ESEA allowed him to issue waivers from some of NCLB’s restrictive mandates, such as the requirement that all students achieve proficiency in reading and math by 2014. In return for flexibility regarding NCLB requirements, states would need to “improve educational outcomes for all students,” following ongoing reform efforts “such as transitioning to college and career ready standards and assessments... and evaluating... teacher and principal effectiveness” (Duncan, 2011). And the USDOE report, *A Blueprint for Change: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, reminded states that funding would continue to be tied to implementing the administration’s plan. “To better measure how states, districts, schools, principals and teachers are educating students,” the report indicates, “funds will be available only to states that are implementing assessments based on college- and career-ready standards that are common to a significant number of states” (pp. 11–12).

In sum, RTTT and the Obama administration’s reform efforts rely on coercive measures, or “incentives,” that have made national standards and testing-based accountability the defining features of federal school reform. In fact, RTTT included \$361 million for the development of assessments aligned with the Common Core, led by the Partnership for Assessment and Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)

and SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium. More than 40 states have teamed up with these assessment associations (Onosko, 2011, pp. 1–2).

#### HOLDING ACCOUNTABILITY ACCOUNTABLE: THE PITFALLS OF TESTING

We have already seen how standardized tests lead to an excessive amount of instructional time spent on test preparation as well as time spent for the administration of tests. High-stakes testing is an invalid system of measurement, which is why the American Psychological Association's policy on testing forbids making significant decisions about a student on the basis of a single test (Elmore, 2002). And state-level standardized testing over the past three decades has failed to eradicate poverty or erase the achievement gap (Amrein-Beardsley, 2014).

The Obama administration nonetheless elevated the role of testing, particularly in terms of teacher evaluation. The USDOE promotes evidence of “student growth,” normally measured through value-added models. Value-added models (VAMs) refer to statistical models devised to measure a teacher's impact on student learning using standardized exams while attempting to control for variables. There are student-growth models that are not properly labeled VAMs, but they often suffer from the same validity problems as VAMs, and sometimes are worse as there are fewer controls in many of these models. It should be said, however, that value-added models are useful in certain circumstances, such as when a school performs under state averages yet may have made greater gains in student learning than a comparison group (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008, p. 65). These models remain “notoriously imprecise” (Ballou & Springer, 2015).

Attention to VAM swelled in the mid-2000s as it became clear that NCLB's Annual Yearly Progress measures were inadequate, and provided little useful data in terms of individual student achievement or teacher effectiveness. The USDOE consequently funded pilot studies to incorporate VAM into existing state evaluation systems (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008, p. 65). Under the Obama administration, the experimentation with VAMs was transformed into its widespread adoption by states for the purpose of determining teacher pay, promotion, or dismissal.

There are many problems with making substantial decisions based on VAMs. For one thing, the American Statistical Association notes that VAMs normally evaluate correlation, not causation (American Statistical Association, 2014). That is, simply because two things are related, such as teacher impact on student learning, it does not prove that one caused the other. There are too many variables, what researchers call confounding factors, to state that VAMs are a reliable measure of the “teacher effect” on student learning (Lomax & Kuenzi, 2012, pp. 7–10). Lomax et al. identify “variables” to include categories such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, English language learners, and special education classification. While VAM models *attempt* to control for these factors, they cannot control for the related issues of parental level of education, summer learning gain/loss, tutoring, and still undiscovered covariates (Lomax & Kuenzi, 2012, pp. 7–10).

Worse yet is the persistent problem of missing data that further undermines VAMs' reliability (Braun, 2005). State education agencies considered inadequate data systems a "major challenge" in the implementation of value-added estimates (Ballou & Springer, 2015, p. 79). Existing regression models deal with this data issue, but have not been properly analyzed in the context of VAM (Lomax & Kuenzi, 2012, pp. 7–10). Kane, Staiger and Geppert (2012) have also shown that one-time factors alone, such as flu outbreak or a noisy environment, can lead to large variations in test scores. As a result, the American Statistical Association (2014) concludes that "VAM scores themselves have large standard errors...[and] make ranking unstable, even under the best scenarios for modeling." And the Congressional Research Service cautions the lack of reliability in VAMs "may not produce results that are stable enough to support decisions regarding promotion, compensation, tenure and dismissal" (Lomax & Kuenzi, 2012, p. 14). A study commissioned by the USDOE concludes:

Value-added estimates for teacher-level analyses are subject to a considerable degree of random error when based on the amount of data that are typically used in practice for estimation...error rates...will be about 26 percent if three years of data are used for estimation. This means that with a typical performance measurement system, more than 1 in 4 teachers who are truly average will be erroneously identified for special treatment. (Schochet & Chiang, 2010, p. 35)

In addition to the wide error rates in VAM, test score changes are largely the result of the aforementioned factors that occur outside the school. "The majority of the variation in test scores," the American Statistical Association explains, "is attributable to factors outside of the teacher's control" (American Statistical Association, 2014). A USDOE-sponsored study concludes that "more than 90 percent of the variation in student gain scores is due to variation in *student-level factors* that are not under control of the teacher" (Schochet & Chiang, 2010).

What all this reveals is that teacher intervention as measured under testing systems accounts for only a small portion of a student's achievement. This is not to say that this teacher percentage is unimportant. It is, however, inappropriate for legislation to mandate student growth models since most research demonstrates that it is a biased and invalid model in its current form. That controversial value-added models can only measure a small portion of student growth, yet are used to make weighty decisions about schools and teachers is unwarranted.

Leading researchers have documented alternative models for the evaluation of teacher effectiveness, and it does not require repetition here (Amrein-Beardsley, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012).

#### SUMMARY

Of course, the reform policies and legislation outlined above are far more complex than the brief introductory overview offered in this chapter. I emphasized the

evolution of testing-based accountability as it has become the central narrative of school reform. Accountability and testing have a long trajectory and the current manifestation is a product of previous reform efforts. Other related, and often overlapping, developments concerning the expansion of charter schools and the privatization of schooling deserve equal attention but are beyond the scope of this brief overview. Federal reform has rightly brought attention to the needs of at-risk youth over the past half-century, yet it pursued and continues to pursue misguided policies for the elimination of inequity. School reform is an easy way for politicians to talk about inequality; it allows them to avoid authentic discussions regarding the redistribution of wealth. The point of this chapter is that standards (standardization) and testing have evolved over time, across administrations and political parties. My aim is not to dismiss the federal government's role in educational policy-making, but demonstrate that it and its "subnational" entities represent a top-down approach that simply seeks to reform the existing system, rather than dig deep into the U.S. structures of inequality. It is not a new message, but one that continues to be denied and evaded and therefore is worthy of repetition.

Alternatives to heavy-handed reform are far more modest today than in 1965, where this chapter started. In that day policy-makers responded to widespread political activism through reform legislation. However, ordinary people who saw the limitations of top-down legislation engaged in local, experimental projects. One of the most poignant examples of an organizing tradition for transformation rather than simple change is the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools. The Freedom Summer campaign was organized by several civil rights groups under the banner of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). It was an outgrowth of the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The Freedom Schools attracted roughly 1,000 volunteers, mostly White, Northern college students, to Mississippi. The overarching purpose was to register disenfranchised Blacks and develop alternative schools as an escape from the failed, segregated public education system. The organizers had hoped that 1,000 students would register. By July 26, 1964, approximately 2,135 students enrolled in 41 Freedom Schools across the state. In early June, 575 African-American youngsters had already signed up in Hattiesburg alone (Mirra, 2010).

Freedom Schools offered a practical example of what is commonly dismissed as a utopian dream. Teachers and students lived together in a community with a shared vision. Decisions often were made by consensus or "horizontally"; participatory democracy was favored over top-down decision-making. The schools integrated activism and academics, combining voter registration drives with history, math, and even readings of James Joyce. In short, Freedom Schools operated outside the existing structures with the goal of facilitating organizing traditions and decision-making practices among the students, parents, and concerned citizens (Mirra, 2010). As noted, Warren and Mapp have recovered some similar organizing efforts today, and if school reform in a democracy means anything, it should mean people making decisions about those things which regulate their lives.

In closing, proponents and opponents of standardized testing frame it as a civil rights issue. During the first day of the Freedom Schools, three civil rights workers went missing: Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman. When the bodies were discovered months later, one comrade offered the following eulogy. “In a violent army, when your comrade goes down, you pick up their gun. In a non-violent army, when your comrade goes down, you pick up their dream.” Their dream of equitable, fair schools is today still a dream (Mirra, 2010). Countless local school reformers fight to make it a reality. Will tests and accompanying punishments provide protection for our most marginalized citizens? Will the reality of an equitable society come to fruition through a test score?

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> I am not arguing against federal involvement in education altogether, but large “vertical” efforts often overlook local needs and tend to reproduce the system that designs them. At the same time, top-down mandates can sometimes reduce local suffering. For example, authentic national health care and federal grants for free lunches are certainly worthy and useful efforts. My critique is that the types of school reforms implemented from the federal government, and what researchers call subnational entities, are unlikely to achieve their stated goals.

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