**Schools as Institutions of Empowerment**

How privatizing education can benefit the poor

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**Abstract**

Schools create the next generation of citizens who determine what the country will look like—socially, politically and economically. These three components of statehood work symbiotically so that a focus on one or two is not enough to address injustice holistically. This paper contends that education reform, therefore, must focus not only on the neoliberal concerns of investing in “human capital” but also on empowering individuals within marginalized groups at the human level. The dynamics of poverty, inequality and injustice encompass a range of basic human realities that deal with beliefs, culture, ideology, and the definitions of power and authority in a society. Only when there are mechanisms in place that give individuals—despite their race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic level, etc.—control over their own self development and self determination will the U.S. achieve real social, political and economic equality. In this paper, I assert that privatizing education in low-income communities is the most efficient way to circumvent the social and institutional structures that preserve the status quo.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction: Education in the right hands 4

II. Why does the government produce schooling? 7

III. The implications of government-provided schools for marginalized groups 9

IV. A look at what highly successful education reformers are doing today 16

V. Why the poor need privatized schooling 18

VI. The need for a new approach to reformation: tangible implications 29

Works Cited 33

## I. Introduction: Education in the right hands

*“Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.”*

*–George Washington Carver*

a. Why schools can solve the problem of social injustice

The United States Department of Education has deemed education the “new game-changer driving economic growth and human development.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The merit of education stems from its purpose in creating human capital, the definition of which comprises the skills and abilities of an individual that make him or her a viable component of the economy. In other words, today education is perceived as “an investment one makes in one’s child or oneself to ‘add value’ to better compete in the labor market.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Schools provide students with a set of skills that benefit them individually and benefit the economy as a whole as laborers, producers and consumers.

Yet this is not the only function that schools serve. And to consider schools as limited in this purpose—i.e., to create human capital—means that “[t]eaching and learning are driven by performance indicators such as benchmark scores, narrowing the curriculum and producing a new regulatory culture of ‘performativity and fabrication.’”[[3]](#footnote-3) An education system that focuses solely—or even primarily—on the creation of human capital prevents schooling from fulfilling its potential as a true game-changer. Not only is education vital to the life of an economy, it is vital to the life of a democratic society, as well. Schools are an opportunity to eradicate oppression and oppressive attitudes from the root.

A complete conception of social justice reveals that the poor are not poor solely because of an unfair or uneven distribution of goods or resources. Rather, most poor people are poor because of systemic domination and oppression, which arise from social, corporate, legal, and political structures in society. Because corporations, legislatures and politics are made of people, I contend that addressing domination and oppression in the sociocultural context of schools can have a more effective bottom-up—rather than top-down—impact on social justice in America.

Schools create the next generation of citizens who determine what the country will look like—socially, politically and economically. These three components of statehood work symbiotically so that a focus on one or two is not enough to address injustice holistically. Education reform, therefore, must focus not only on the neoliberal concerns of investing in “human capital” but also on empowering individuals within marginalized groups at the human level. People are not robots. The dynamics of poverty, inequality and injustice encompass a range of basic human realities that deal with beliefs, culture, ideology, and the definitions of power and authority in a society. Only when there are mechanisms in place that give individuals—despite their race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic level, etc.—control over their own self development and self determination will the U.S. achieve real social, political and economic equality.

d. Privatizing education in America: the only way

The problem with public education is that the government produces it. This is a problem, specifically for people from lower classes and other marginalized groups, because the government comprises those people with legitimate political power: white, middle and upper class citizens. This means that the government is the primary obstacle of schools becoming institutions that empower oppressed people groups and effectively change the status quo to help create a more equal society. White middle and upper class Americans have no incentive to change the status quo, because they benefit from a racist and classist society—knowingly or not. Until this group of citizens is willing and able to consciously recognize and change a system that discriminates against the poor and people of color, it will not change. Therefore, I contend that privatizing education and establishing a voucher system that allows marginalized groups to circumvent government control will empower those marginalized communities and remove them from a formidable source of oppression. Schools that cater to the needs of the poor and marginalized will get to the root of social injustice, therefore more effectively closing the socioeconomic gap in the U.S. in the long term. This paper has a specific audience: it is written for leaders within low-income communities and communities of color. It is written to those that care about achieving true equality in America.

e. Review of the literature and organization

Several scholars have advocated privatizing education in the U.S., and several more have offered up extensive evidence regarding the degradation of quality in the education system today. It is commonly known, even outside the realm of academia, that public schooling in low-income communities is abysmal. I draw on the works of Pauline Lipman (1998 & 2011) and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (1990), who provide qualitative as well as quantitative data about the failure of public schooling in low-income communities. As for private school advocates, I utilize the works of, particularly, James Tooley and Lant Pritchett, while drawing on evidence provided by charter schools like the Knowledge is Power Program and the SEED Foundation. This paper will focus on bringing together the research of these individuals and groups. While Lipman and Irvine contend that the quality of education in low-income communities is too low, the solutions they offer fail to recognize what Iris Marion Young (2011) terms the concepts of domination and oppression.[[4]](#footnote-4) Changes at the state and federal level do not address the real need of the poor and people of color in the U.S. Tooley fervently advocates privatization of education because, he claims, it is the most democratic method of schooling. Parents should be offered the choice regarding what their children learn in schools, what they do, and ultimately why they go. Furthermore, private schools create competition that serves as a kind of quality assurance. For these reasons, I contend that privatizing education in low-income communities is the key to improving the quality of schools and the outcomes they produce.

In the following section, I will discuss the real reasons why the government produces schooling—essentially the ideological homogenization of society and socioeconomic stratification based on race and class. I will then address the implications that government-produced schooling has on marginalized groups. This section will look briefly at the history of education in America and show how, historically, schools have functioned to preserve the status quo rather than enforce or promote social change and equality among all people. The second half of the paper will demonstrate why private schools can address the most detrimental problems in the education system, using evidence from other countries as well as evidence from private/charter-school model in low-income communities in the U.S. Lastly, I will conclude with tangible reasons why the need for a new approach to education reformation is so urgent.

## II. Why does the government produce schooling?

*“An educated people can be easily governed.”*

*–Frederick the Great*

*“In the first place, God made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made school boards.”*

*–Mark Twain*

It is clear that governments lack concern for “issues of market failures or equity” but produce schooling “because of a desire to control socialization.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The idea that government-produced schooling is a tool of social control is supported by the history of schooling of immigrant children in the 1800s, Native Americans, Asian Americans, black slaves, free black children, and Spanish-speaking immigrants today. This notion, however, belies the myths that have surrounded public education, which Pritchett (2002) dispels. These myths “portray public schooling as obvious, inevitable, and the result of entirely benign motivations.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Pritchett presents a model called the “Regime Ideology” Model of Public Schooling, which addresses the real reasons governments produce schooling. The first component of the model is perhaps the most critical: schooling produces both skills *and* beliefs.[[7]](#footnote-7) Schools of course are the places children go to learn how to calculate mathematical equations, how to read, how to write, how to study, as well as other cognitive, or hard, skills. At the same time, though, they learn social skills and values about relational roles, communication and what is considered “normal,” “normative,” and “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” All of this occurs within the formal and informal enclaves that comprise school. This leads to the second component of the model: regime and citizen preference.[[8]](#footnote-8) Even—and perhaps especially—in a democratic society, education is critical to maintaining a regime’s authority and power. Children learn the dynamics of their government and the way that authority and power are delegated and practiced. The third component of the model is political viability and constraint.[[9]](#footnote-9) Governments may need to placate some groups in society, while oppressing or neglecting others. The regime can only maintain viability if certain groups in power are appeased. This can be done through schools, as I will demonstrate in sections below. The culmination of these three components of government produced schooling results in the last component: controlling the inculcation of beliefs requires direct production.[[10]](#footnote-10) In order to ensure that certain beliefs or ideologies are being disseminated and spread throughout society, the government must produce schooling directly. This ensures that educators (teachers, administrators and curriculum developers) are accountable to the government.

This model explains why nearly every type of government produces schooling. Every type of government has some ideological message it deems necessary to promote in order to sustain the status quo. As for the U.S., a characteristically capitalist regime, the country’s economic system “depends on citizens’ more or less willing acquiescence in the existing distribution of economic power and their more or less willing participation.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This is the ideological message schools convey to students. Capitalism functions because of inequality; thus, it is no surprise that American schools are profoundly unequal in the quality of education they provide to certain groups. Some—middle and upper class students—receive much better quality education that prepares them for college and a white-collar job. Others, however, receive poor quality education that prepares them for wage-earning, blue-collar jobs. Historically, public schools’ purpose is to systematically benefit white, middle and upper class children at the expense of the poor and, often, people of color. Government provided and regulated schooling has functioned as an institution that regulates “poor and ethnic minorities in order to preserve the interests of those within society who monopolized political and economic power.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus, public schools serve as tools of social control—to the detriment of the marginalized and the benefit of those in power.

## III. The implications of government-provided schools for marginalized groups

*“Much of education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants.”*

*–John W. Gardner*

In the 1830s, Southern states passed laws forbidding people from teaching slaves to read.[[13]](#footnote-13) North Carolina’s bill reasoned that “teaching slaves to read and write has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion, to the manifest injury of the citizens of this state.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This law and others like it exemplify the way the government uses education—or the deprivation thereof—as a means of social control. Indeed, this kind of policy falls under the political viability and restraint component of Pritchett’s “Regime Ideology” Model. This kind of discriminatory policy has been contributing to the marginalization of certain groups in American society for centuries. Slaves, Eastern European immigrants, Native Americans, free African Americans, Asians, women, and new immigrant populations are consistently subject to policies and laws that systematize their marginalization.

Despite the fact that the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision determined “separate but equal” to be unconstitutional in 1954, schools today display the most negative remnants of the era of segregation. Moreover, ensuing laws and policies have in effect reinstated segregation on the basis of race and class in public schools. But unlike schools in the era of segregation, schools today are controlled at all levels by white Americans.

To understand poverty among people of color today, it is vital to understand the history of demographics in America. During World War II, two populations flows occurred. The first was the migration of black people from the rural South to the cities, and the second was the migration of white people from the central cities to the suburbs.[[15]](#footnote-15) Boustan’s (2010) research shows that the “relationship between black arrivals and white departures provides suggestive evidence of ‘white flight,’ a process by which white households left central cities to avoid living in racially diverse neighborhoods or jurisdictions.”[[16]](#footnote-16) These migratory patterns persisted into the 1950s and 60s. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that efforts to desegregate schools were met by subtle—yet powerful—resistance from middle and upper class whites. *Milliken v. Bradley* of 1974 is a primary example of the kind of new Jim Crow laws that reinstate systemic discrimination on the basis of race in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. In this case, the Supreme Court, comprising four of President Nixon’s appointees, thwarted efforts in Detroit to desegregate schools through a “desegregation plan that encompassed … outlying school districts.”[[17]](#footnote-17) In the 5:4 decision, the Court asserted that desegregation did not require “any particular racial balance in each school, grade, or classroom” and “emphasized the importance of local control over the operation of schools.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This controversial decision, which exempted “suburban districts from the desegregation process” would ensure the continuation of “’white flight’ from cities to the suburbs.”[[19]](#footnote-19) White flight proved detrimental to the economy of inner cities because of the fact that for every black migrant’s arrival, more than one white departed, causing housing prices to fall.[[20]](#footnote-20) But the greater implications of the *Milliken* case are that the white middle and upper classes got the rule of law on their side by legalizing their efforts to evade racial integration.

The ramifications of *Milliken* are present in today’s inner city schools, which consist of primarily black and Hispanic students. It is not within the scope of this paper to address holistically the causes of poverty in inner cities today, but it is imperative to note how poverty—and therefore race—plays a role in the achievement gap so present in schools in low-income communities. One of the most obvious ways in which low-income schools fare worse than more affluent neighborhoods is based on the funding these schools receive. Because schools are jointly funded by federal, state and local revenues, poorer neighborhood schools receive less funding. Moreover, the primary source of local funding comes from real estate tax.[[21]](#footnote-21) Lower levels of funding are even more detrimental in low-income communities because the students’ needs are much greater. In these communities, students often face more difficult environmental challenges: single, working parent(s), foster care, drug and alcohol abuse, gang affiliation, malnutrition, teen pregnancy, physical and sexual abuse, racism, and many other hardships. To compound the problem of funding, more “experienced teachers (who are better compensated and qualified) are … likely to concentrate in schools in which working conditions are easier; in particular they are likely to exit schools with relatively high concentrations of high-need pupils.”[[22]](#footnote-22) To make matters worse, because of teacher unions, schools cannot fire teachers with tenure. Irvine (1990) quotes one school administrator saying, “’Given the fact that it’s almost impossible to fire horrible teachers, you assign them to the kids whose parents complain the least. That ends up being the lower classes.’”[[23]](#footnote-23) Schools in low-income communities, therefore, start off at a disadvantage because they cannot afford the same resources that schools in higher income communities can afford, nor can they get rid of those teachers that are merely perpetuating the problem of low quality education. The *Milliken* decision is compounded by the fact that children from low-income families are essentially excluded from better, suburban schools because white middle and upper class people drive up the “value of housing within the catchment area boundaries of a ‘good’ school making attendance unaffordable for less advantaged parents.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Without a quality education, the chances of getting out of poverty are extremely limited.

a. Deeper roots of the problem

These problems of resource allocation are a fraction of the story of failure in public schools, and measures to address them—though important and well-intentioned—are not getting to what I argue is the root of the problem: the cultural discrepancy between middle-class teachers and lower-class students and/or students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. As mentioned above, schools have historically served as institutions that standardize the ideologies and culture of America. Public schools were established so that immigrant populations from Eastern Europe could become better integrated into the “American”—i.e. white, middle-class—way of life. Native Americans were sent to off-reservation boarding schools to rid them of their indigenous culture.[[25]](#footnote-25) This “Americanization” process in schools has not necessarily always meant that the students adopt the white, middle-class culture; rather it has been a means of preserving the superior status of white middle class citizens and the inferior status of people of color and the poor. For example, segregation policies before *Brown v. Board of Education* were ruled unconstitutional because racial segregation “in public education has a detrimental effect on minority children because it is interpreted as a sign of inferiority”[[26]](#footnote-26) despite the supposed equality of material and human resources. Even after the *Brown* decision, districting policies have effectively maintained the socioeconomic inequalities between black and white Americans, the poor and the well-off.

The opinion of the Court in *Brown* articulates the fact that the distribution of necessary material resources is not the only factor for which to account when determining the quality of education that students receive. Indeed, schools are institutions in which social and intellectual skills are acquired, and, as noted, in which ideological messages and beliefs are conveyed and learned. The specific ideology that fosters the most damage to students of the lower class is what Lipman (1998) terms the “meritocratic theory of academic success.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This idea completely neglects the racism and discrimination that pervades the system. The meritocratic theory justifies “social selection by class, race and gender and … legitimate[s] inequality and the inevitability of winners and losers. Its credibility rests on a set of implicit assumptions about equal opportunity, the rewards of hard work, and variation in human ability.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The reality belies the theory profoundly, and in turn the false theory perpetuates the reality by teaching young lower-class students of color that they are impoverished and/or doing poorly in class solely because they aren’t working hard enough. This kind of racism and classism “intersects with the ideology of meritocracy to elevate attributes and characteristics that favor White, middle-class males over African Americans and then rationalize the latter’s failure to succeed as the outcome of a fair and necessary contest.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The reality is that the competition isn’t “fair” for two reasons: first, these students start off at a disadvantage because of their socioeconomic background; second, these students are subjected to what Irvine calls the “hidden curriculum,” which covertly and overtly discriminates against people of color and the poor.

This hidden curriculum is the “unstated but influential knowledge, attitudes, norms, rules, rituals, values and beliefs that are transmitted to students through structures, policies processes, formal content, and the social relationships of school.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Four hundred years of white supremacy in the U.S.[[31]](#footnote-31) has ensured that white people—specifically white middle and upper class people—control institutions. In schools, which serve as a “social context in which race, class and gender oppression are pervasive and historic, the imposition of the dominant group’s language, behavior norms, and values is a way of maintaining dominance.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Teachers and administrators use various formal and informal policies and pedagogical methods to ensure that the dominant culture is upheld in schools. Tracking, for instance, is a primary method of maintaining the stratified status quo. Academic tracking places some students in higher-level classes and others in lower-level classes, oftentimes in an arbitrary manner—or in a manner that does not primarily account for ability. Indeed, a study concluded that tracking is more heavily influenced by students’ socioeconomic status than by ability.[[33]](#footnote-33) The tracking process originated during industrialization, which demanded a “hierarchically differentiated labor force,” with the intention of providing students with “different ‘abilities’ and ‘interests’” with different “curricula and educational futures.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Higher academic tracks are meant to prepare students for higher education. These tracks include programs like the College Board’s Advanced Placement classes, which count as college credit with the passing of the end-of-year exam. On the contrary, lower academic tracks do not prepare students for higher education. Instead, they increase the likelihood that these students “will be relegated to lower-paid jobs within the segmented labor market.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Without a doubt, students have different academic abilities, but tracking them according to this has “no educational benefit for students and in fact is deleterious to academic achievement, extracurricular participation, self-concept, peer relationships, career aspirations, and motivation.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

One of the main causes of low achievement among students of color and the poor is due to what is called the deficit explanation, which casts the blame for low academic achievement on the “deficiencies” in students’ social and economic condition, their families and culture.[[37]](#footnote-37) Socioeconomic backgrounds of students become the justification for having low expectations for them. It also becomes the excuse that prevents educators from finding solutions to problems.[[38]](#footnote-38) Irvine (2000) claims there is a lack of cultural synchronization between educators and students of a different race and/or class. Specifically, her research focuses on black students but can be applied to children of other ethnicities. The cultural rift between white middle class teachers and their lower class and racially diverse students is characterized by misunderstanding. African American culture is “distinct, African-based, identifiable, and more ancient than European culture.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Furthermore, “manifestations of Africanism, researchers claim, are more prevalent in lower-class black communities where racial isolation persists and assimilation into the majority culture is minimal.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Because state institutions are inherently culturally dominated by white, middle to upper class people, what is considered “mainstream” or “normative” is essentially just that. Therefore, the culture of the “subordinate group” tends to be viewed as “deviant”[[41]](#footnote-41) and treated differently from the rest.

b. For the preservation of the status quo

Progressivism, or neoliberalism, has embodied “the cultural patterns and preferences of the middle-class intellectuals who developed them.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Both Schutz (2010) and Lipman (2011) decry the neoliberal agenda, which prioritizes not the development of individuals and society for social good[[43]](#footnote-43) but on “improving students’ job prospects and the larger economy.”[[44]](#footnote-44) This focus on tangible resource distribution and position within society comes at the expense and neglect of more intangible aspects of power. Neoliberalism has arisen from the dynamics of social class history in the United States. With the passing of the industrial revolution, the middle class began to develop a “culture of domesticity, individualism, and restrained association,” a culture in contrast to the working class, which “necessarily depended upon … collective solidarity—of families, of communities, of trades, and more.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The ramifications of the rise of the middle class are extremely potent today. Indeed, “children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Most middle-class jobs require a college degree, and often the type doesn’t matter to the job. The point is that institutions and organizations depend on “how middle class [their] employees are.”[[47]](#footnote-47) In other words, students learn how to be white and middle class in schools or else they relinquish almost any opportunity to participate in positions of power or privilege.

The cultural divide between the middle and lower classes is still firmly established, and it manifests itself in schools today. The point of government provided schools is not to homogenize the *culture* of the entire society, but to homogenize the *ideology* that the dominant culture possesses power and to sustain the stratified status quo, whereby people of color are socially, economically and politically oppressed. Oppression based on race and ethnicity has been a cornerstone of American history. Only in recent decades has there been backlash against the oppression of these groups. The strides toward equal access to opportunities, however, have been only somewhat successful. Oppression—in perhaps its most dangerous form—has quietly been sustained by laws, policies and programs in the guise of good intentions. The fact of the matter is that social change “has always posed a threat to community, and schools have always been viewed as a mechanism for preserving the core of the old values within the new structure.”[[48]](#footnote-48) In schools today this same kind of preservation of core old values—the values of white middle class Americans—is occurring. As long as they are in power, and as long as the state controls schools, this kind of otherization and oppression will inevitably continue. Insisting that the dominant culture remains the standard in public schools virtually ensures that certain groups will be marginalized.

## IV. A look at what highly successful education reformers are doing today

*“Change is the end result of all true learning.”*

*–Leo Buscaglia*

Major change in American schools is needed across the country, and there are certainly schools, programs and organizations that are creating this change. This section of the paper will focus on those schools and groups that have closed the achievement gap between low-income and high-income students almost entirely. Smith’s (2008) book *Schools That Change: Evidence-Based Improvement and Effective Change Leadership* provides real case studies of how leaders within eight different schools in America have transformed them from failures into exceptional successes. Smith also discusses why these schools’ transformations are exceptions rather than rules, as well as what the leaders within these schools did to make substantial changes to them. The schools Smith studies are diverse in region and geography; they are in Alaska, California, New York, Kentucky, Michigan, Wisconsin and Texas. In deciphering the common themes among the eight transformed schools, Smith lists three symbiotic, “essential elements”: context, capacity and conversations. Each of these elements within the eight schools underwent modifications and transformations that in turn led to the transformations of the schools as a whole.

The context created by schools comprises four facets. The first is the culture of the schools, meaning “what people believe, value or prioritize.” The second is the climate or tone of the schools, i.e. the “feeling one senses upon walking through a school.” The third is the physical environment. And the fourth is “the dominant messages being conveyed.”[[49]](#footnote-49) In each of the schools that Smith evaluated, they experienced a kind of “reculturing” in which the school staffs uprooted their “extremely entrenched … belief that all children could *not* learn” and replaced it with the idea that it was the responsibility of the teachers and administrators to ensure that all children *did* learn.[[50]](#footnote-50) Without this reculturation, structured policies aimed at student achievement would fail because of a lack of teacher and administrator belief in them. By changing the culture of these transformed schools, the principals in turn changed the climate—the feeling of the school. They implemented rituals—such as reciting the school mission during the morning announcements—and established policies that demonstrated the school staff’s appreciation for student achievement and personhood. One of the simplest means of transforming the climate of a school is to transform the environment within it. A common theme among these transformed schools involved an environment that looked inviting and welcoming—a place that staff and students *wanted* to go to. Lastly, each of these schools, through their culture, climate and environment, conveyed an important message that in turn helped to maintain the culture, climate and environment. The message communicated the mission or objective of the school so that everyone was on the same page, working toward the same goal.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Perhaps one of the most important essential elements to transforming schools is having the capacity to actualize the transformations envisioned. Each of the schools in Smith’s research exemplified the capacity to change. That overall capacity consists of five sub-capacities: 1) to plan, including making data-driven decisions; 2) to teach in effective ways, 3) to assess by measuring success; 4) to work in teams rather than in isolation; and 5) to learn how to do each of the above.[[52]](#footnote-52) The eight principals in Smith’s study knew that to create lasting and substantial change in their schools, they had to look at their schools as a system that could not be bettered by just improving one component.[[53]](#footnote-53) These principals crafted teams of people that could learn how to plan, teach, assess and work in teams and therefore they built up the capacity of their schools to improve at the roots.

The last essential element of transformed schools is conversation. Smith writes that “in the eight schools in this book the conversations shifted from the mundane to the meaningful.”[[54]](#footnote-54) School staff conversations revolved around students, teaching and learning, the school’s vision and progress.[[55]](#footnote-55) As Smith points out, the need for conversation among people who are supposed to be working toward a common goal is critical. If school staff members don’t talk about “the need for significant school change, then it means it is not a high priority, not an important concern, not something [they] value.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Well in line with the three criteria for school improvement that Smith discovered in his research, the Knowledge is Power Program has created meaningful change in the kind of schooling offered to children in low-income communities. KIPP is a charter management organization with 125 schools operating or scheduled to operate around the country.[[57]](#footnote-57) The school context is characterized by a “No Excuses” culture in which the “schools focus on traditional math and reading skills and feature a long school day and year, selective teacher hiring, strict behavior norms, and a strong student work ethic.[[58]](#footnote-58) KIPP schools defy the norm by graduating 90 percent of its students from high school and sending more than 80 percent to college.[[59]](#footnote-59) Eighty-seven percent of KIPP students come from low-income families, and 95 percent are African American or Latino.[[60]](#footnote-60) A National Bureau of Economics report indicated that KIPP generates “substantial” reading and math assessment score gains for those enrolled.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Much like KIPP, the SEED Foundation provides privately operated boarding schools for children in low-income communities. SEED schools embody a college-bound culture of high expectations. The core values of the schools are “responsibility, respect, self-discipline, compassion, and integrity.”[[62]](#footnote-62) The results these schools produce are exceptional. Ninety percent of SEED students graduate from high school; more than 90 percent have been accepted to 4-year colleges; and more than 90 percent have enrolled in college.[[63]](#footnote-63) Like KIPP, SEED schools take in students by lottery. Eighty percent of the students taken are performing below grade level at the time of enrollment.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Each of the schools or programs discussed above shares a common theme: dedication and commitment despite external forces, such as poverty, and students’ underachievement. Teach for America, a national corps of top recent graduates “who commit to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools” is yet another example of how educators are engineering successful reform. TFA teachers’ pedagogical methods and strategies are based on the Teaching as Leadership model. The model comprises six prongs: 1) set big goals; 2) invest students and their families; 3) plan purposefully; 4) execute effectively; 5) continually increase effectiveness; and 6) work relentlessly.[[65]](#footnote-65) This model places the responsibility of student achievement on the teacher, forcing him or her to do what is necessary to bridge the gap between students and teachers in many public schools serving low-income students. Teach for America corps members are also required to undergo intensive study of the problems that impoverished children and parents face, develop strategies to employ culturally relevant pedagogy, and maintain a standard of excellence for all students regardless of race or class.

The schools, programs and organizations that are making real changes in education in America, especially in low-income communities where they are needed most, exemplify what *can* be done if people employ an entrepreneurial spirit to education reform. It is important to note that most of these are private endeavors that cater to the specific needs of the students within a specific community. Indeed, as Smith (2008) notes, reformers cannot assume that all schools are alike and that there is “one miraculous strategy for improving all schools.”[[66]](#footnote-66) There may indeed be frameworks, as KIPP, SEED and TFA demonstrate, but ultimately the results of those frameworks will look different for children in different regions, racial/ethnic groups, and income-levels. What these groups do is provide a blueprint for how communities can take education into their own hands.

## V. Why the poor need privatized schooling

*“Poor people cannot rely on the government to come to help you in times of need. You have to get your education. Then nobody can control your destiny.”*

*—Charles Barkley*

Nearly every part of the public school system belies the justifications for government provided education. With the system in place, only a portion of the American population benefits from schools the way they should. The rest are the victims of latent and conspicuous discrimination. Government provided schools, therefore, because they begin with children, reinforce and sustain the cycle of poverty in a way that undermines any other program aimed at poverty reduction. Public schools help to create welfare- and state-dependent citizens because they fail to provide lower-class children with the skills necessary to become self-reliant *and* because they socially degrade lower-class children and children of color. This has a very real and tangible consequence on their morale, expectations of themselves, and their sense of identity—who they are and who they can become. As Pritchett states, public schooling

“nearly always tries to take control of education from parents and ‘the village’ and provide an education that is more nationalist and less local, more secular and less folk religious, more attuned to modern economic ideologies and less attuned to ‘traditional’ occupations, and more under the control of national political forces.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

Schools work to ideologically homogenize a population that cannot be homogenized. The result, instead, is marginalization, discrimination and ultimately oppression. This belies the tenets of Americans’ supposed appreciation for pluralism. Indeed, the very First Amendment to the Constitution was created to protect the flourishing of pluralism—religious, political, philosophical, or otherwise. Important to note is that the First Amendment has provided *equal* protection to pluralistic ideas and beliefs. How is it that schools do not reflect this clearly American value? Instead of allowing pluralism to flourish and protecting this heterogeneity equally, public schools attempt to homogenize Americans ideologically and create a stratified and unequal society.

The current education system has failed the poor in the United States, and therefore it has failed many people of color. Moreover, the government and other organizations are doing too little to solve the problem on a national scale. Despite federal, state and local policies and programs, as well as private organizations like Teach for America, KIPP, SEED, and the Harlem Children’s Zone, the data still display the gross disparities between rich and poor, whites and people of color. The statistics are particularly disturbing when considering that “minority students make up 40.7 percent of the public school population.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

**Table 1.1**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **%** | **White** | **Black** | **Hispanic** | **Asian** | **Native American** |
| **Overall poverty rate** | 9.9 | 27.4 | 26.6 | 12.1 | n/a |
| **Child poverty rate[[69]](#footnote-69)** | 12.4 | 38.2 | 35 | 13.6 | n/a |
| **High school dropout rate (2010)** | 5.1 | 8 | 15.1 | 4.2 | 12.4 |
| **College enrollment rate (2010)** | 60.5 | 14.5 | 13 | 6.1 | 0.9 |
| **College graduation rate (2008)[[70]](#footnote-70)** | 36.3 | 19.5 | 22.8 | 37.5 | 18.8 |

Just by looking at the poverty statistics in America, it is easy to see that the people in power—white middle and upper class Americans—have little incentive to enact policies and programs that will seriously challenge the status quo and counter the social and institutional structures that promote socioeconomic stratification. Without a doubt, college graduation rates prove that the quality of education for students of all ethnicities must improve. But policies that white middle and upper class Americans enact are sure to target education improvements for white middle and upper class students because the political voice for minority groups is not loud enough. Because poor people and people of color in America do not wield as much political power as white middle and upper class Americans, it is virtually impossible that the government will address their needs effectively.

a. What is the purpose of public schooling to the people?

As it is now, schools function based on the social efficiency hierarchical model,[[71]](#footnote-71) whereby a fraction of the population actually attains the skills needed to climb the hierarchy. I contend, however, that parents should decide exactly what the purpose of schooling should be for their children. As I have shown above, poor parents and poor children suffer the greatest disadvantage because they do not wield the political power that middle and upper class parents wield. To establish a system that equally benefits all children, Americans must realize that the government is not the proper mechanism for accomplishing this end. Furthermore, in order to uphold values like equality, there must be a bottom-up approach to restructuring the attitudes and mentalities of Americans—both white and of color. Justice is not only about the distribution of certain resources, goods or positions. Justice starts with eradicating socio-cultural oppression. In order for schools to truly become places of physical, social, mental, emotional, and intellectual empowerment for *all* students, the educational experience should and must be differentiated to suit those that are politically, socially and economically oppressed.

Federal and state policies and programs are not localized enough to provide what specific groups need. The United States is too large a country for the kind of top-down approach it has used in education from the moment public schools were established. As the American population continues to change and diversify, grassroots-level approaches to education are becoming more and more necessary to make a real change in the quality of education provided to students across the country. Parents and the people that comprise communities should take schooling into their own hands and demand to be the ones that determine what the purpose of schooling is for their children. For poor communities—and therefore for many people of color—taking control of the education system can liberate them from the status quo that is sustained by public schools. Privatizing education, furthermore, is the only way to avoid the “Regime Ideology” that justifies government-produced schooling. Parents should have a choice as to what skills and beliefs their children learn. Also, parents and children in a so-called democratic state should not be constrained by the desired learning outcomes of the government, nor should certain groups be subjected to purposeful marginalization for the benefit of the majority or dominant group.

b. Proven benefits of private schools

In our current system, private schools have been proven to fare better than public schools on average. A 2006 study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed that in grades “4 and 8 for both reading and mathematics, students in private schools achieved at higher levels than students in public schools.”[[72]](#footnote-72) These differences were statistically significant. One ESL study, which accounted for race/ethnicity, family income, parents’ marital status, and parent education, showed that “scores of private school students grew an additional one point out of 50 over two years.”[[73]](#footnote-73) This effect is substantial considering that, in keeping with the model, “a student who attended private school for 12 years would reach a level of academic achievement six points higher out of 50, or 12 percent of the total spectrum from the highest to the lowest students, than that same student would have achieved with the equivalent years of public school education.”[[74]](#footnote-74) The scores are well in line with Americans’ perception of private schools versus public schools, according to a 2012 Gallup poll. Seventy-eight percent, 69 percent and 60 percent of those surveyed reported that independent private schools, parochial schools, and charter schools, respectively, provide excellent/good education. Only 37 percent of surveyors said public schools provided excellent/good education.[[75]](#footnote-75)

All around the world, private school students score better on standardized tests. But why is this? It is not that teachers are more qualified, according to state standards; nor is it that teachers are better compensated.[[76]](#footnote-76) What is perhaps most advantageous for private schools in the U.S. is the lack of bureaucratic hurdles. A study by the Eli and Edyth Broad Foundation found “75 examples of how bureaucracy stands in the way of America’s public school students and teachers,” the results of which it divided into three categories: first, “resources often don’t reach the classroom”; second, “teachers often don’t receive the support they need, and many talented Americans don’t enter the profession at all”; third, “policies and procedures—which may be designed to comply with laws and regulations—often don’t allow the school system to pursue its core mission: advancing student achievement.”[[77]](#footnote-77) These are problems that private schools can avoid because of more streamlined and localized processes. Because public schools are funded by tax dollars, they rely on the functioning of an entire national and state governing system. With so many “middle-men,” there is far greater instance of corruption, red tape, miscommunication, and unnecessary or unmade purchases.[[78]](#footnote-78) Moreover, the teachers’ unions, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), make up an enormous political bloc. Indeed, the larger NEA is one of the most powerful political forces in the nation. Because of these teachers unions, bad teachers are protected by tenure. In other words, public school teachers are nearly impossible to fire.[[79]](#footnote-79) Implementing policies and pedagogical methods in the classroom at a state or national level is, therefore, difficult because so many poor quality teachers remain in schools. As long as teachers unions are still a viable part of the public school system, barriers to education reform will remain impregnable. Private schools, on the other hand, do not deal with teachers unions. Their operations are independent of the state. Thus private schools teachers have an implicit incentive to meet the standards of the school’s principal because their job is always at stake.

c. What the poor in the developing world can teach the U.S.

Though Americans don’t like to think so, people in the developing world do have a lesson to teach about how to improve education when the state’s methods are not enough. The quality of education in developing countries around the world has fallen under heavy scrutiny from the international community—and from the parents that send their children to those schools. Of course, those that suffer most from poor quality education are the impoverished. Governments, such as Nigeria’s, have implemented Universal Basic Education programs to reach Millennium Development Goals promoted by the international community. But developing countries often lack state capacity to adequately provide services like universal basic education in an efficient and beneficial way. UBE in Nigeria, as well as in India and Kenya, has led to overcrowding, high pupil-teacher ratios, inadequate quality and quantity of resources, inability to hold teachers and administrators accountable, among a host of other issues. The result is that the overall quality of public schools has been on the decline, leading to higher dropout rates—especially among the poor, who have no incentive to send their children to school rather than let them work. But the poor in these countries *do* recognize that education is critical for their children to break the cycle of poverty. But they also recognize that they cannot leave such an important task in the hands of a government whose priority is not the people’s welfare.

One of the most elemental problems in the public schools is the lack of teacher accountability. Like in the U.S., teachers in Lagos are difficult to fire because of teachers unions. Aside from classrooms being far too overcrowded for effective teaching and learning to take place, many teachers come to school late, don’t come at all, or fail to do much of anything when they are in the classroom. James Tooley’s research revealed “out of 110 public schools assessed in Lagos, … in almost a third of those classes observed, the teachers was not teaching.”[[80]](#footnote-80) Moreover, the standards for becoming a teacher in Nigeria are detrimentally low—much like the standards in the U.S. are. In Nigeria, where society is stratified based specifically on ethnicity, many teachers hold obvious prejudices against their students—especially when they come from a different part of the country to teach. As Schweisfurth (2011) notes, in a “stratified society where some groups are perceived culturally to have more educational potential than others, teachers may have low expectations of individual students’ ability to manage their own learning, if they are from unfavored groups.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Students from these groups face the same kind of overt and covert discrimination that students of color face in the U.S.

Because of these problems in government provided schools, the poor have taken education into their own hands, and the results have demonstrated a significant improvement. People in impoverished communities have taken on the role of entrepreneur and provided a much-needed service to the community: smaller, private schools that are unaided and unrecognized by the government. Parents pay a small fee for their children to attend these schools, and the schools are run like a business providing a service to their clients. So many of these schools have bloomed across Nigeria that they account for about 43 percent of student enrollment in schools, according to Tooley’s study conducted in Lagos.[[82]](#footnote-82) Clearly, private schools for the poor are in high demand, which means they must be providing a product that even those in poverty are willing to buy. And these unaided, unrecognized private schools offer an exceptional bargain. Students at the schools do not have to give up any of the amenities that government-funded schools have. Private schools for the poor provide resources like drinking water, blackboards, desks, toilets, libraries, and computers at about the same rate—or a better rate—than public schools.[[83]](#footnote-83)

The biggest and most consequential difference in these unrecognized, unaided private schools for the poor is the teachers. These teachers are provided a strong incentive to be present in their classrooms and to be actively engaged. These schools operate at the local level like small businesses owned and operated by members of the community. Teachers in these schools are “from the community; they [know] the problems facing the children, for they themselves [experience] such problems every day. And they [can] explain things in their mother tongue, if required, unlike the teachers at the public schools.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Here lies the real thrust of the lesson these private schools for the poor in Nigeria can offer poor communities in the U.S. These private schools, unlike the public schools, offer their students what Ladson-Billings (1995) terms “culturally relevant pedagogy.” This type of pedagogy addresses the “discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at school in the speech and language interactions of teachers and students.”[[85]](#footnote-85) I will discuss more in depth why this is so critical for minority racial and ethnic groups in the section below.

Private schools for the poor in Nigeria provide poor parents with leverage they never had with the government-provided schools. In these school systems, because of the increasing number of unaided, unrecognized private schools for the poor, there are options, which means there is competition among these schools to provide the services worthy of these poor families’ money. The system of accountability inherent in private schools is critical to the vitality of the education system as a whole. At this local, grassroots level, it is not the faceless bureaucracy that poor parents have to confront if they are dissatisfied; rather it is the local principal and/or school owner. In other words, those in authority are not far removed from the parents themselves. They are approachable, knowable and humanized by the mere fact that they are community members who understand the context in which these parents and children live. Because of the way the systems work within private schools for the poor, whereby everyone is motivated by real and tangible incentives, the results of homegrown schools have been unsurprising. Tests conducted in public and private schools in Lagos, Nigeria, showed that on average poor private school students scored well above public school students and just under students from private schools for wealthier children.[[86]](#footnote-86) These test results clearly reveal—and rich and poor parents alike have come to recognize—that the government does not produce schooling because it is most efficient.

The similarities between the situation of the poor in Nigeria and the poor in the U.S. are stark. In each case, government provided schooling denies marginalized groups the opportunities quality education can provide. And in both cases, these marginalized groups do not have the political power or know-how to change the system. Instead of changing it, both groups have deemed schools to be institutions that help white and/or the middle- and upper class people only and thus they refrain from becoming invested in school. When left to their own devices, the poor in Nigeria have proven that they can change their own trajectory through education that they produce themselves.

d. Why privatizing education is the key to helping the poor and marginalized

A top-down approach has not been quick or effective enough in eliminating the classism and racism that characterize the politics, institutions and social structures of the U.S. This is because top-down approaches focus essentially on the distribution of certain goods, resources, services, wealth, social positions and jobs. But Young (2011) makes a strong case for shifting the primary focus from distribution to issues of domination and oppression. Framed in the context of education, she writes:

“Providing education opportunity certainly entails allocating specific material resources—money, buildings, books, computers, and so on—and there are reasons to think that the more resources, the wider the opportunities offered to children in an educational system. But education is primarily a process taking place in a complex context of social relations. In the cultural context of the United States, male children and female children, working-class children and middle-class children, Black children and white children often do not have equally enabling educational opportunities even when an equivalent amount of resources has been devoted to their education.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

The lack of cultural synchronization between schools and students in low-income communities is in large part one of the key reasons for the disparate outcomes of achievement for students from low-income families and students from high-income families. Typically, those in positions of authority in schools are part of the dominant and oppressive race and class, perpetuating the system of overt and covert racism and classism. This phenomenon is compounded by the fact that black and Latino teachers “represent only about 14.6 percent of the teaching workforce.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Even more disturbing, “in over 40 percent of public schools there is not a single teacher of color. And in urban and high-poverty schools where minority teaches are disproportionately employed, teaching staffs are still predominantly composed of white teachers.”[[89]](#footnote-89) The importance of this cultural discrepancy cannot be downplayed, for in America power and authority are byproducts of being a part of the white race as well as the middle and upper class. Power is not determined by who votes or who works hard enough.

If marginalized groups in society take education into their own hands, like many in the developing world have, they own an important tool of empowerment. Public schools today work to empower specific groups and disempower others. Because the U.S. comprises so many diverse people groups, it is essential that—rather than subscribing to the same “reality, history and perspective”—educators use a “humanizing pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history and perspective of students as an integral part of educational practice.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Students of color today are forced to make an unnecessary and crippling decision about their identity. They may choose to sever ties to their racial and ethnic cultural roots and to adopt the dominant white, middle and upper class culture. Or they my choose to accept their own cultural roots at the expense of suffering more acute domination and oppression from white, middle and upper class Americans and their political, economic and social systems. However, if schools can teach children of color and children from lower classes the “positivity of group difference,” schools become “liberating and empowering. [Because] [i]n the act of reclaiming the identity the dominant culture has taught them to despise …, and affirming it as an identity to celebrate, the oppressed remove double consciousness.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Schools that are owned and operated by people within the communities and/or by people who promote the dismantling of the status quo serve as primary opportunities to start a bottom-up shift in the power structure of America. Schools can show students from non-dominant groups that success can be coupled with an acceptance, appreciation and practice of their individual cultures.

This kind of bottom-up social empowerment as a precursor to political and economic equality is vital to the success of top-down approaches. The two work in tandem. Schools are central to the political struggle between the dominant and marginalized groups. Under the public school system, however, the dominant group inevitably wins. But if non-dominant groups are empowered as leaders within schools, they can catalyze a broader socio-political movement that challenges the status quo. Young’s (2011) point on this topic is worth quoting at length:

“In a political struggle where oppressed groups insist on the positive value of their specific culture and experience, it becomes increasingly difficult for dominant groups to parade their norms as neutral and universal, and to construct the values and behaviors of the oppressed as deviant, perverted or inferior. By puncturing the universalist claim to unity that expels some groups and turns them into Other, the assertion of positive group specificity introduces the possibility of understanding the relation between groups as merely difference, instead of exclusion, opposition, or dominance.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Rather than focus on distribution of resources and wealth, this approach to power and privilege gets at the root of social injustice.

As Irvine (1990) notes, the era of segregation provides evidence for the fact that autonomy within schools serves as a source of empowerment for people of color. Indeed, desegregation caused many black people to perceive that “they had lost control over their vital institutional structures, no longer autonomous and independent from external forces.”[[93]](#footnote-93) Segregated black communities—though established for unjust, prejudicial and racist reasons—did act as a screen to the “harmful effects of racial diatribes hurled at its members from the larger, hostile society.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Schools within segregated communities were “semiautonomous” because all-white boards of education had little interest in black schools, as long as no problems arose. They were administered by black principals and staffed by black teachers, ensuring a cultural continuity within schools. Furthermore, schools served as more than just centers for education. They were important social organizations “through which black professional educators discharged their responsibilities to their community. … Their professional and personal identity was organically tied to sources in the community network system, not to structures and agencies outside the community.”[[95]](#footnote-95) It is important to note that the great black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement came from segregated schools.

Desegregation placed black schools that had served as important communal establishments into the hands of white administrators, “who generally ignored the educational matters of black schools.”[[96]](#footnote-96) Black teachers were fired, black schools closed down to integrate into white schools, and black children were forced to suffer under the prejudices of white school officials. The concept of “the collective whole, the collective struggle, and the collective will” was lost and black Americans were, in turn, perhaps even more socially disempowered.

Culturally relevant pedagogy today does not require segregation, nor is that what I am advocating. While differences between groups are certainly a reality, people truly fail to understand their society if they close themselves off from other people groups. Culturally relevant pedagogy is a celebration of the cultures of the children that comprise a classroom. What it does require, if implemented as a policy across the board, is more localized autonomy. It cannot work with sweeping state and/or national policies because diverse populations require diverse methods of ensuring quality education. The state does not have the capacity to ensure this. Indeed, a “politics of difference argues … that equality as the participation and inclusion of all groups sometimes requires different treatment for oppressed or disadvantaged groups.”[[97]](#footnote-97) In the case of education, privatization should be the “different treatment” that oppressed and disadvantaged groups adopt so that they have autonomy over what their own empowerment looks like.

## VI. The need for a new approach to reformation: tangible implications

*It is only as we develop others that we permanently succeed.*

*–Harvey S. Firestone*

Providing schools to marginalized groups that set new standards for their achievement, like KIPP, SEED and the Harlem Children’s Zone, is a vital step in eradicating racial and other inequalities. The benefits of equal opportunity are very real and very tangible. Too many people fail to realize that equipping the poor with the skills they need to move up the socioeconomic ladder is imperative for the improvement of the economy as a whole. In the U.S., according to data from 2007, 1 percent of the population controls about 43 percent of the net financial wealth of the U.S..[[98]](#footnote-98) Further, the top 20 percent of the population owns 93 percent of the net financial wealth.[[99]](#footnote-99) The education system only perpetuates this status quo by providing a fraction of students with the qualifications they need to succeed in college and beyond. While 78 percent of students earned their high school diploma on time in 2010—a record high since 1976—twenty-six percent of seniors are below the basic reading level.[[100]](#footnote-100) This means that over a fourth of students graduating from high school “do not have the skills necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities.”[[101]](#footnote-101) It is therefore safe to speculate that a great portion of graduated seniors don’t have the skills they need to go to and succeed in post-secondary schools.

Though a select few people in the U.S. may benefit from the drastically uneven distribution of wealth, the majority will suffer the consequences as the disparities increase. Several news articles within the past few years indicate that there is a shortage of high-skilled jobs, even during a time when unemployment is unusually high in the U.S. Robert Funk, chairman and chief executive of Express Employment, a national staffing firm based in Oklahoma City, said in a July 2012 interview that his firm currently had 18,000 open job orders it could not fill.[[102]](#footnote-102) With a current unemployment rate of about 7.7 percent, the explanation for Funk’s difficulty in finding workers is not that there are none that need jobs. The real explanation is that the demand for high-skilled jobs, which require a college degree or other certification, is met by a short supply. As Funk notes, “’There is higher demand for skilled jobs and less demand for unskilled positions than we’ve seen coming out of past recessions.’”[[103]](#footnote-103) Instead of turning to the domestic labor force, companies are forced to look overseas. More than 100 executives from the technology sector wrote in a letter to President Obama that one of the “biggest economic challenges facing our nation is the need for more qualified, highly-skilled professionals, domestic and foreign, who can create jobs and immediately contribute to and improve our economy”.[[104]](#footnote-104) With the new global economy and outsourcing of low-skilled jobs overseas, the jobs left in America will increasingly require high-skilled people, especially in math, engineering, technology and computer sciences. The rate of college graduates who leave college with degrees in these fields has dropped from 11.1 percent in 1980 to 8.9 percent in 2009.[[105]](#footnote-105) This trend provides evidence for why “the McKinsey Global Institute estimates that the U.S. could be short as many as 1.5 million college graduates by 2020.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

The response to this shortage of high-skilled human capital—a response that benefits the U.S.—must be the improvement of education. If so many children are not graduating from high school prepared to enter college or vocational training so that they can obtain higher skills, the U.S. will be increasingly prone to losing its “current lead in areas that give [it] an edge in business and engineering innovation.”[[107]](#footnote-107) The demand for low-skilled jobs will inevitably rise, shifting wages down and forcing many to take on jobs with poor working conditions. In turn, the socioeconomic disparity in America will rise even more. International Monetary Fund economist Andrew Berg conducted a study that shows income inequality has a profoundly negative effect on economic growth.[[108]](#footnote-108) The study shows that “making an economy’s income distribution 10 percent more equitable prolongs its typical growth spell by 50 percent.”[[109]](#footnote-109) At the rate the U.S. is going, sustainable economic growth will be harder and harder to come by.

a. A call to think outside the box

Milton Friedman poignantly wrote in 1995 that there is hardly anything in the U.S. that is technically more backward than its public education system: “We essentially teach children in the same way that we did 200 years ago: one teach in front of a bunch of kids in a closed room.”[[110]](#footnote-110) It is time that those who suffer most from the public education system in America do something about it because the stakes are high not for just the marginalized but for everyone in the country. Change is difficult. It takes time. And there is no one that knows it better than those who have suffered from racism and classism: change takes the relentless efforts of many. But it can and it must be done lest we face a national crisis.

Groups across the country—successful charter schools and private schools, as well as organizations that work to promote education equality—are demonstrating to poor communities and the rest of America that students from underserved communities can succeed if they are held to the same standards as their high-income counterparts. Private schools for the poor in Nigeria provide an example of what the poor can do for themselves when they circumvent the oppression of the state. America is a country that values entrepreneurship and the free market. The poor should not be excluded from mechanisms that provide incentive for improving and therefore disrupting the status quo. Nor should they be denied the ability to determine for themselves how they will develop.

The system may not function in poor people’s favor, but just as there is in Nigeria, there are ways to circumvent it. Privatization, then, is the most viable option for low-income communities to improve their educational opportunities. Providing poor parents with a choice about where they send their children to school is inherently empowering because it places them in a decision-making process to which public schools deny access. Schools compete for numbers and therefore provide better quality education. In a country that touts its love of capitalism, why not let the free market take over one of the most important service in the world? The need to turn away from tradition, which is proving to be a detriment to our future, and really delve into a new kind of reformation is imperative.

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