Three Puzzles in Search of an Answer From Political Scientists (With Apologies to Pirandello)

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Three Puzzles in Search of an Answer
from Political Scientists (with Apologies to Pirandello)

Political scientists have paid too little attention to the politics and policy of education in the United States. Most scholars could write an analogous sentence about their own cherished fields of research, but this one is really true. Consider a few facts: social scientists often describe the United States as a welfare laggard compared with similar European nations because it spends relatively less on family support, employment assistance, health insurance, or public child care. But the U.S. has always been a welfare leader in the field of education; here public schooling started much earlier, has always included more people, has until very recently given students more years of education, and has absorbed a larger share of resources. In 2001, it cost about $390 billion to educate children in public schools (that does not include higher education or the more than 10% of K–12 students in private schools or being home-schooled). That is more than our nation spent on defense and not much less than on social security in that year. Almost a quarter of all state expenditures go to K-12 schools, and the 7 million people with part- or full-time jobs in schools constitute more than half of all local governmental employees. Public schools are the second largest employer in Los Angeles County and the largest in Baltimore (the same holds for other cities).

Beyond these figures, but arguably responsible for them, is the unique place that public schooling occupies in the American political and social culture. Europeans believe more strongly that the state should ensure a decent standard of living for all citizens; Americans believe more strongly that the state should provide opportunity, with the citizen then responsible for earning a decent standard of living. And schools are arguably the most important public institution through which Americans have chosen to (at least in theory) provide opportunities, teach the skills needed to succeed, equalize life chances, transmit democratic norms and skills, and bring outsiders into the public arena and mainstream society. For better and for worse, public education is the United States’ only shared public arena that can and almost does include all future adults.

It is no surprise, then, that Americans argue intensely over whom to include in public schooling, on what terms, with what resources provided by whom, and for what ends. A central manifestation of this perennial conflict was the era of school desegregation, roughly from 1954 until the early 1990s. This article begins by exploring a puzzle over the dominant interpretation of that era, and continues with explorations of two other puzzles that grow out of the first. All present, to me at least, genuine questions that call for the kind of sophisticated political analysis that members of our profession could provide, but largely have not.

The “Failure” of School Desegregation

Analysts and advocates, left and right, whites and nonwhites, mostly concur that mandatory desegregation was a massive social experiment that failed. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy observed once during oral argument that he saw “no advantages to have been brought about by busing.” African-American mayors in Cleveland, Seattle, Denver, St. Louis, and elsewhere have led battles to end court-ordered desegregation plans. Politicians can perhaps be understood, even forgiven, for mistaking or exaggerating important facts (although it is noteworthy, and I will return to the point, that most politicians believe their constituents to be more eager to hear about desegregation’s apparent failure than about its arguable success). But sophisticated political analysts say the same. Although the sociologist David Armor finds “forced racial segregation” to be “unconstitutional and immoral,” he concludes that “it has not been demonstrated that . . . desegregated schools by themselves produce consistent social and educational benefits; in some cases, the consequences of desegregation may be harmful to race relations and black self-esteem” (Armor 1995, 112). From a very different political perspective, Gary Orfield and his colleagues also agree that desegregation is failing—in this case because there is too little rather than too much of it. They ask, “has Martin Luther King’s dream become a nightmare?” and answer that it is moving rapidly in that direction (Frankenberg et al. 2003, 7).

Why do both social scientists who would endorse more mandatory desegregation and those who would prefer less (or none) agree that school desegregation is a failure? That general question must be framed slightly
differently for proponents and opponents. With regard to the
former: virtually every child psychologist and education expert
agrees that children are more inclined to improve with encour-
agement than with harsh and disdainful criticism; report cards
in grade schools offer only the choices of “excellent,” “satis-
factory,” and “needs improvement.” “Failure” is nowhere to be
found. Are adults so different, that they are best motivated by
an insistence that their quite extraordinary efforts for several
decades have come to naught?

With regard to opponents: setting aside those who would
prefer race relations to be bad and African Americans to re-
main in a subordinate position, why do so many conserva-
tives reject school desegregation in favor of more choice-based
policies? After all, several decades ago conservatives argued,
in the name of coherence and neighborhood solidarity, for
policies that assign children to schools near their homes rather
than sending them all over the district in scattered and unpat-
terned directions. Why endorse such a scattered approach
now, rather than place-based schooling?

The question of why most analysts concur that school de-
segregation has failed is sharpened by the fact that one can
make a plausible case that it has succeeded. In 1964, virtually
no black children attended school with whites in the south
(where three-fifths of African Americans lived). By 1988, the
proportion of black students in majority white schools in the
south had risen to almost 44%. That figure has since slipped
to 31%—a substantial reversal, but not (yet) a “nightmare.”
For the nation as a whole, the proportion of black students in
“intensely segregated schools” declined from two-thirds in
1968 to one-third in 1988, and has since risen to 37% again,
a move in the wrong direction, but not failure. So
desegregation has to some degree worked, in the crude
but essential sense of putting more black and white children
into the same school buildings than would otherwise have
been there. Although all of this can be (and is) contested, the
evidence also suggests that desegregation has worked in more
substantive ways as well. Economist Jonathan Guryan con-
cludes that “desegregation plans . . . can account for about
half of the decline in dropout rates of blacks between 1970
and 1980 . . . . [They] had no effect on the dropout rates of
whites” (Guryan 2001, abstract). African Americans’ achieve-
ment test scores improved steadily (and whites’ scores did not
decline) in reading, math, and science during the 1970s and
1980s, the two decades that black and white students increas-
ingly attended school together—and did not improve during
the 1990s, when the amount of racial mixing was partly re-
versed. Many things happened during this period, of course, so
direct causation is very hard to prove (or disprove). The best
recent study, however, found that even controlling for family
background and prior achievement, blacks’ (and Latinos’) read-
ing scores are substantially closer to those of whites in inte-
grated elementary schools compared with racially separate
ones (Phillips 1998).

School desegregation has also arguably had valuable and
important long-term effects. Compared with racially isolated
black students, those from desegregated schools have higher
job aspirations, do better in college, and are somewhat more
likely to hold white-collar and professional private sector jobs.
Both black and white students, and later adults, from inte-
grated schools have more close friends and casual acquaint-
ances of the other race than do those from racially isolated
schools. They are more likely to attend desegregated colleges,
live in integrated neighborhoods, hold jobs in integrated work
settings, and be comfortable in racially-mixed work groups.

Finally, Americans endorse school desegregation, at least in
principle. In a 1999 survey, fully 80% of young adults (who
are most likely to have experienced desegregated schools),
compared with 63% of the elderly, agreed that integration “has
improved the quality of education received by black students.”
Across all age groups, as many whites as blacks concurred.
Seventy percent of young adults (and 45% of the elderly) also
agreed that it had improved whites’ schooling. In this case,
however, the races split; a majority of blacks and a minority
of whites concurred. Substantial majorities of both races agree
that school desegregation has “improved relations between”
the races, and by 1995, fully 96% of whites agreed that black
and white children should attend the same schools. Pollsters no
longer bother to ask that question.

Good arguments challenge such findings, but these results
were all reported by highly reputable researchers and there is
more supporting evidence behind each. The policy question
they raise is why, in Richard Kahlenberg’s wonderful observa-
tion, “today a bipartisan consensus holds that integrated
schools are a good thing but we shouldn’t do much of any-
thing to promote them” (Kahlenberg 2001, 42). But the politi-
cal science questions are the focus here: why do many respon-
sible public officials insist that school desegregation has failed,
and why do many reputable academics, even those who agree
that it has had substantive benefits, also insist on its failure?
Why emphasize only one side of a very mixed and complex
narrative?

Just as the meaning of “failure” varies with people’s politi-
cal ideology and position, so analytic explanations for their
assertion of failure will also vary. Political science is not
bereft of tools to analyze the various reasons. Theories of
racism presumably provide a psychological explanation for
some opponents’ views—although none of those quoted above.
Skepticism about governmental intervention in private choices
(and disregard of the fact that governments are deeply impli-
cated in the racial composition of neighborhoods and school
districts) presumably provides an ideological explanation of
other opponents’ views. Black mayors’ desire to retain their
constituents might provide a political explanation for elected
officials’ rejection of further efforts to mix the races. The
need to keep ideologically-driven members of an organization
motivated might explain liberals’ insistence on fiery rhetoric
about approaching nightmares (Mansbridge 1986). Black na-
 tionals might reject the apparent insult embedded in the
claim that black students need desegregation in order to im-
prove their schooling outcomes. And we must not underesti-
mate the old standby of the issue attention cycle, or the sim-
ple fact of disillusionment that follows high hopes only
partially realized.

Nevertheless, this set of explanations has an ad hoc quality.
Political scientists have not done enough to develop general
theories of why most analysts and political actors are so much
more likely to emphasize failure than success, despite the
mixed evidence in this and other cases and despite the fact
that most of us believe that individuals in private life respond
more effectively to encouragement than to discouragement.
This apparently excessive emphasis on failure holds in other
arenas such as environmental policy on the left and fears
about the dissolution of the family on the right, so it seems
worthy of more sustained attention than we have given it.

The Mismatches of School Vouchers

As schooling advocates moved away from the “failed” pol-
icy of school desegregation, they mainly moved toward two
quite different reforms—market-based choice systems or
standards-based systemic reform. (Some endorsed both and
some neither, but in this brief essay I can only touch
separately on these two efforts.) Both present fascinating pol-
icy issues and either might offer real hope for students and
schools that desperately need it. But here I want to look only
at the issues that they raise for political science.

Urban school districts, with occasional exceptions in partic-
ular schools or along particular substantive dimensions, are
largely a disaster. Regardless of whether one sees the cause as
too much or too little school desegregation as the cause, or
sees it as irrelevant, that view is widely shared—and appropri-
ate. I cannot address here why urban schools are so terrible;
suffice it to say that they demonstrate in my view the willing-
ness of a majority of Americans to accept deep racial, ethnic,
and class divisions and to deny equality of opportunity to
other people's children so that their own children have a better
chance of attaining success. Whatever the reason that urban
schools came to be so bad, proponents of vouchers and of
systemic reform both believe that their preferred policy offers
the best chance to help urban children. But both proposals ex-
hibit strange political conundrums which political scientists
could, and should, help illuminate.

Voucher advocates face a mismatch between ideologically
committed elites and resistant presumed followers. That is,
market-oriented activists (mostly in the Republican party) seek
to make public resources available to all parents so that they
can choose their child's school, typically including private and
parochial schools. The most sophisticated proponents point out
that well-off parents already have school choice by virtue of be-
ing able to move to a particular district and neighborhood, and
argue that all families deserve the same right regardless of in-
come or residence. But key Republican constituents, especially
those well-off suburbanites (who are disproportionately Anglo),
are not at all enthusiastic about widespread programs of school
choice. After all, some inner-city children might seek admission
to their schools. Thus when it comes to broad programs involv-
ing urban children and movement across district lines, the poli-
tics of choice begin to resemble the politics of desegregation;
many members of the non-urban middle class profess belief but
few are willing to participate in anything more than token num-
bers. Politicians are well aware of that fact, so the two major
private-school choice programs that came into being through
legislative action were authorized only within the city limits of
Milwaukee and Cleveland. No public schools in suburban dis-
tricts adjoining Cleveland accepted either the state's invitation or
a federal judge's plea to participate.

The irony does not stop here, however. Voucher opponents
face an equal but opposite mismatch between ideologically
committed elites and resistant presumed followers. That is, ad-
vocates of public schooling (mostly in the Democratic party)
strongly oppose vouchers, and sometimes also the milder form
of school choice entailed in charter schools. But in many sur-
veys, more African Americans, Latinos, the poor, the young,
urban residents, and the poorly educated—that is, core Democ-
Ratic party constituents—endorse voucher proposals at a higher
rate than do their respective opposites. In some surveys a ma-
jority of one or more of these groups support choice-based
policy reforms.

So both parties face a gap between their elites' ideology
and their constituents' preferences. What can political science
say about this curious phenomenon? Perhaps it is an indicator
of a potential party realignment, if that rubric still holds up.7
Perhaps it points to broader patterns of mismatch, say between
the well-educated, who tend to be relatively liberal on social
policies and conservative on economic policies, and the
poorly-educated, who tend toward the reverse.8 In any case,
here is another instance in which political scientists could illu-
minate the politics of policy advocacy, and thereby be fur-
thered in the task of developing theories of political alignment,
coalition-building, and political ideology.

The Political Disincentives for
Systemic Reform

My third and final puzzle arises from the other major policy
response to the perceived failure of school desegregation—the
15-year-old effort to create statewide (and perhaps national)
curricular standards, and then hold schools, teachers, and stu-
dents accountable for achieving them through tests. Why
would elected officials endorse such a reform, and beg voters
to hold them accountable for achieving its goals?9

Since the mid-1980s, that is what they have been doing. I
have space here for only one representative quotation, from
James Hunt, former governor of North Carolina:

In this new era of accountability, candidates will be judged for
their education leadership. They must be knowledgeable about
the issues and relentless about results. I predict that the avowed
education candidates who fail to follow up platitudes with per-
formance, and who fail to match rhetoric with results, won't be
around much longer.

Almost every state has established explicit standards in one or
more subject areas, and most have set up tests to see if the
standards are being met. Failure to pass the tests has severe
consequences for either students or teachers in 25 states, and
the stringency of standards and their accompanying tests rose
during the 1990s. Large majorities of both houses of Congress
enthusiastically passed the "No Child Left Behind" law
(NCLB) early in 2002; it imposes a strict testing regime with
considerable penalties for failure, and the district-level thresh-
hold for passing is mandated to rise each year for the next
decade.

Political science gives us few theories to explain why these
changes have occurred; in fact, it is much better at explaining
why they should not have done so. Citizens were not clamor-
ing for higher standards; for 30 years, survey respondents have
given the nation's schools an average grade of C and their
own child's school an average grade of B. These are not stel-
lar grades, but they have remained stable so they cannot ex-
plain the changing policy. When asked about problems in the
schools, respondents are always much more concerned about
discipline, drugs, and violence than about low standards, insuf-
cient achievement, or the quality of teaching. In fact until re-
cently, Americans were more likely to complain about too
much curricular innovation and too much focus on grades than
about too little. The most substantial public opposition to the
new regime of standards and testing has arisen in politically-
powerful suburban districts (where it is likely to have the least
impact). So citizen demand, either in general or in strategically
located constituencies, does not explain this sweeping reform.

Neither does interest group pressure. Educators were among
the last to endorse the movement toward standards and testing,
and many powerful educational interest groups still oppose it
or are deeply skeptical. Business leaders were at the forefront
of the standards movement—itself a historical oddity that
needs explanation.

Nor can systemic reform be explained as a rational response
to a widely-recognized crisis. Inner city schools are indeed in
a crisis, and arguably getting worse. Other schools are not in
a crisis; over the past few decades, they have done worse by
some measures, better by others. The standards movement,
however, does not target resources, energy, penalties, or incen-
tives on urban schools and districts. If policy-makers were
really committed to leaving no child behind, new state and federal laws would devote tremendous attention to the schools in the 100 largest cities (and a few rural areas), and leave the rest to muddle along. They do not.

Most significantly from a political science perspective, scholars have argued for decades that the last thing any elected official wants is to be held electorally accountable for achieving a particular outcome at a given moment, especially when that outcome is extremely difficult to accomplish and its accomplishment lies in the hands of a notoriously loosely-coupled entity such as the public school system.10 Furthermore, as Douglas Arnold has shown (1990), politicians usually design laws and policies so that they cannot be held accountable if the law imposes high costs (such as failure to graduate) on identifiable constituents (such as the parents of a failing student). Why, in any case, would Democratic members of Congress and state legislatures promulgate a policy that teachers’ unions hate, and why would Republican members of Congress and a conservative Republican president promote a law (NCLB) to enhance the federal role in education, and to prod schools into helping poor, black, and immigrant children—not exactly Republican constituents?

Perhaps the whole decade and a half of reform has been nothing but smoke and mirrors: Republicans are pretending to be compassionate in order to be conservative, and Democrats are pretending to be tough-minded in order to be tender-hearted. And members of both parties are pretending to believe the other, and trusting that voters will not see through the ruse. Conversely, perhaps Republican politicians genuinely believe that the threat of test failure will give administrators, teachers, and students enough of an incentive to pull their socks up and really get to work—or NCLB is a Trojan horse for vouchers, as some believe (but see the second puzzle, above). Or perhaps Democratic politicians genuinely believe that Republicans will, this time, provide the financial resources needed to improve abysmal and deeply poor schools, despite the fact that they lie mainly in cities full of Democratic voters. Whatever the explanation for the bipartisan movement toward standards-based reform with high-stakes tests, it stands badly in need of some careful analysis by sophisticated political scientists.

Here too, this particular case opens wider arenas. When and why do politicians behave unexpectedly—such as by insisting that they be held accountable for very difficult measured outcomes, or by allying with members of the other party against the preferences of their own powerful constituency groups (in this case, teachers’ unions and suburban parents for Democrats and Republicans respectively)? Perhaps theories of agenda setting or issue evolution would be helpful here (Stone et al. 2001; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Perhaps theories of federalism could explain when governors, legislators, and mayors seek to become involved in an issue that they have struggled for a century to avoid. Perhaps demography is, eventually, destiny—and politicians of all stripes concur that they must make policies to incorporate the rising number of immigrants.11 Perhaps theories of Congressional decision-making, or of presidential manipulation of public opinion, are relevant. In any case, the subject of school desegregation and its complicated aftermath warrants much more attention from our discipline, even among those for whom the particular policy issues are not of special interest.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, facts, quotations, and arguments in this article come from my co-authored book, Hochschild and Scovronick 2003. My thanks to Nate Scovronick for our many years of working together on this project. He is not responsible for anything in this essay.

2. Those that have 90% or more non-Anglo students.

3. Data in this paragraph are from Frankenberg et al. 2003. All of these changes must be seen in light of our nation’s changing demography. From 1968 to 2000, the number of Latino public school students grew from 2 to 7.7 million. Anglo students declined from 34.7 to 28.8 million, and black students increased from 6.3 to 8.1 million. The number of Asian students also increased to almost 2 million. So there are absolutely fewer, and relatively many fewer, Anglo students with whom to desegregate.

4. In addition to the material cited in Hochschild and Scovronick 2003, see Quillian and Campbell 2003.

5. Pride 2000 offers an interesting case study of the politics of misperceptions of desegregative failure.

References


