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## Introduction: Education Reform Past, Present, and Future

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## Introduction: Education Reform Past, Present, and Future

Jeffrey T. Manuel

### I

Education reform has roiled public education in Illinois and nationwide in recent decades. Beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983 and accelerating with the No Child Left Behind Act's passage in 2002, the landscape of public education has been reshaped by demands for fundamental reform. Critics of public education today argue that it is an obsolete system that is failing students and the nation. These critics blame teachers' unions, educational bureaucracy, and an outmoded curriculum—among other culprits—for what they see as the sorry state of public education in the United States today. Yet there are powerful voices who disagree with these criticisms of public education. Skeptics argue that many critiques of today's public education system are motivated not by genuine desire to improve education for students, but are masks for various get-rich-quick privatization schemes. Other skeptics emphasize that education reform is simply the latest *cause du jour* for wealthy philanthropists. Teachers also have a large stake in this debate. Many teachers feel that their professionalism, their care for children as well as test scores, and their collective bargaining rights vis-a-vis administrators are under assault from potential educational reforms. In short, the stakes for today's educational reform movement are high but there is little agreement about which route to pursue.

This special issue of *The Councilor* offers a forum to discuss the past, present, and future of educational reforms in Illinois and nationwide. Contributors were asked to consider how social studies educators can make sense out of today's educational reform movement within the longer history of education reform and within a broader political and social history of the present-day landscape. Placing today's education reform movement within this longer historical and broader socio-political context is important because it allows educators and administrators to see beyond the occasionally heated rhetoric of present education politics. Do proposed reforms genuinely threaten public education? Or are they merely the latest in a long line of well-meaning if misguided reforms that will likely have little long-term effect on education? We are pleased to introduce the articles in this special issue of *The Councilor* in the hopes providing answers, even if tentative, to these pressing issues facing social studies educators.

### II

Although it is difficult to do justice to the rich complexity of arguments contained in the eleven articles in this issue, several broad themes stand out when the articles are considered together. First, the articles in this issue make it clear that today's education reform movement is only the latest version of a long history of attempts to reform and remake public education. Historians of education such as Andrew Hartman and Diane Ravitch have clearly demonstrated



that American public education has been riven by demands for reform since its earliest moments.<sup>1</sup> Several of the articles in this issue address previous education reform movements that have fallen out of public memory. Historian Molly Jessup’s article, “Mid-Century Education Reform and the Character of Citizens,” recalls the life adjustment education movement of the mid-twentieth century. Life adjustment education sought to merge educational content with character training, a development that Jessup argues presaged recent efforts at character-based education. Addressing developments from later in the twentieth century, Robert Dahlgren offers a fascinating overview of how social studies educators were portrayed in popular films during the 1970s and 1980s. Dahlgren argues that negative portrayals of social studies teachers in numerous films of the era paved the way for the modern era of reform launched in the early 1980s. In an amusing side note for social studies teachers in Illinois, Dahlgren reminds readers that the most famous portrayal of an Illinois social studies teacher was likely Ben Stein’s droning teacher in the film *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. Another powerful reminder of past reform efforts in public education comes from Jonna Perillo’s recent book, *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Professionalism, and Civil Rights from the Great Depression to No Child Left Behind*, which is reviewed by Lindon Ratliff.

In addition to the articles in this issue, past articles from *The Councilor* are a reminder that calls for reform are nothing new to the social studies in Illinois. Although it is now published as an online, open-access journal, *The Councilor* has been published since 1939 as the journal of record for the Illinois Council for the Social Studies. Back issues of the journal, available from the Illinois State University library, contain a unique archive of forgotten calls for reforming social studies teaching in Illinois. Old articles in *The Councilor* acknowledge the need to reform the social studies curriculum, such as a 1963 article claiming that there was “little argument among educators that reform is crucial in the social studies. The inconsistent quantity and quality of social studies instruction is generally acknowledged.”<sup>2</sup> Back issues of the journal also reveal longstanding teachers’ gripes about meddling administrators and politicians. A 1962 article described an “educational climate in which social studies, as we have known it, is under critical examination—even attack.” Educators faced a “wave of curriculum-making by state legislatures that must be resisted,” the author warned.<sup>3</sup> Articles like this are a reminder that many of today’s debates about education reform in the social studies have a longer and more persistent history than is typically acknowledged.

One lesson that can be taken away from the history of past educational reform efforts is that education has never been static. It has always been critiqued and challenged by reformers who saw the worst in their era’s educational system. This contradicts the claims of some reformers today who argue that their particular innovation—or “disruption” in today’s terms—upends an educational model that has been unchanged for decades. For example, Heather Hiles, CEO of educational technology company Pathbrite, argues “we live in a world that no longer needs the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (New York: Basic, 1983); *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> James B. Holderman, “The Illinois Social Studies Curriculum Revision Program,” *The Councilor*, November 1963, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy McClure Fraser, “Social Studies Teachers for the ‘60s and ‘70s,” *The Councilor*, November 1962, 11, 13.



education systems we've perfected—a factory model of education where every child memorizes the same information.”<sup>4</sup> It goes without saying that Pathbrite sells technology that would disrupt this model. Additional examples of technology being sold as solutions to public education's perceived failing to change with the times include the adoption of the Pearson-delivered edTPA exam for aspiring teachers in Illinois. Illinois state law now requires all teacher candidates to have a digital portfolio reviewed by anonymous reviewers working for Pearson. Candidates also pay a hefty fee to Pearson. The turn toward Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) run by for-profit companies such as Coursera and Udacity in higher education offers another example. This point is not to single out any particular educational technology company, but rather to illustrate how today's claims that education needs to be reformed often begin with a false argument that public education has not changed in recent decades.

### III

A second theme that emerges from the articles in this issue is how education reform efforts reveal important yet often overlooked contours of present-day society and culture. In many ways, the articles suggest that today's education reform efforts tell us a great deal about the fragile economy and our fractured culture, even if they reveal little about education per se. Among the best examples of this are two pieces contributed by guest editor Andrew Hartman. By way of a close reading of Teach for America founder Wendy Kopp's two books, Hartman's article, “The Hidden Curriculum of Teach for America,” offers a critique of the organization and the larger education reform movement. Whether well intended or not, Teach for America serves as a Trojan horse for anti-unionism and teacher deprofessionalization. The issue also contains Hartman's interview with Mark Naison, a historian at Fordham University who has written extensively about education reform on his blog *With a Brooklyn Accent*. Recent educational reform regimes have not been aimed at genuine improvement of public education, Naison argues, but instead serve “as a strategy to reduce economic and racial inequality without redistributing wealth through taxation.”

The 2012 strike by the Chicago Teachers Union stands out as a seminal event in the recent history of education reform efforts and has special significance for Illinois social studies teachers. Although the strike involved many stakeholders, former Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teacher Kurt Hilgendorf argues that the strike was fundamentally a backlash against decades of corporate-led educational reform in Chicago. Corporate-led reforms not only harmed minority students, Hilgendorf argues, but quickly became a nationwide model for radically reforming urban public school systems, especially in the wake of former CPS CEO Arne Duncan's promotion to Secretary of Education in 2009. Hilgendorf's analysis of the strike is an important source for understanding this seminal event from one of the strike's on-the-ground participants.

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<sup>4</sup> Heather Hiles, “What if the Education System isn't Broken, Just Irrelevant,” *LinkedIn.com*, March 13, 2013, [www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130313163224-1265384-applied-learning-and-the-future](http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130313163224-1265384-applied-learning-and-the-future) (accessed May 12, 2013).



The articles highlight numerous ways in which today's education reform debates have served as proxies for larger debates about the state of American society and political economy in the twenty-first century. Yet three themes deserve special attention. First is the belief that test scores and other quantitative data will somehow reveal a hidden truth behind the inherent messiness of classroom practice. In the push for more data, education reform has mirrored a broader trend that emphasizes computer-analyzed data's ability to recognize patterns and trends and, proponents argue, make data-driven decisions. The recent popularity of so-called big data illustrates this trend. Yet as historians and social studies educators, we should be wary of these claims to perfect knowledge via quantification. Testing and computer-aided analysis do produce much data, but it is less clear how or whether those data are useful. "Will we ever stop to wonder if the data mean anything important?" asks Diane Ravitch.<sup>5</sup> A second theme that stands out is public education's new role as a scapegoat for rising economic inequality in the United States. There is now overwhelming evidence that economic inequality has risen sharply in the United States since the 1970s. When faced with this fact, however, many observers, especially business elites who remain wedded to a meritocratic vision of American society, cast blame on public education. A recent article in the business magazine *Fast Company*, for instance, argues, "at the root of many American problems lies an ineffective and outdated education system that is failing our students. Inequality and education have always been inextricably linked, and if we don't fix education, we don't fix inequality."<sup>6</sup> Debating public education has become a proxy for debating what's wrong with the American economy. As Diane Ravitch writes, "the current frenzy of blaming teachers . . . smacks of a witch-hunt, the search for a scapegoat, someone to blame for a faltering economy, for the growing levels of poverty, for widening income inequality."<sup>7</sup> Scapegoating public education in this way is frustrating for educators because it asks public education to act as a silver bullet solution to a complex and perhaps intractable problem.

#### IV

Several articles in this special issue point to a brighter future for education reform. Although some recent education reform efforts have been hugely problematic, these authors emphasize that another education reform is happening. Teachers, students, parents, community partners, and administrators are imagining and implementing new class projects and curriculum that promise an exciting future for social studies.

Two articles describe current projects in Illinois that integrate service learning and community engagement into the social studies curriculum. In his article titled "Service Learning in the Social Studies," Lake Park High School teacher Shaun Conway describes an innovative social studies course he has been teaching that allows students to design their own service learning curriculum. Giving students more control over the curriculum and meaningful engagement with

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<sup>5</sup> Diane Ravitch, "No Student Left Untested," *New York Review of Books Blog*, February 21, 2012, [www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/feb/21/no-student-left-untested/](http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/feb/21/no-student-left-untested/) (accessed May 12, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ben Hecht, "5 Disruptive Education Trends that Address American Inequality," *Fast Company*, [www.fastcoexist.com/1681576/5-disruptive-education-trends-that-address-american-inequality](http://www.fastcoexist.com/1681576/5-disruptive-education-trends-that-address-american-inequality) (accessed May 16, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Ravitch, "No Student Left Untested."



the community outside the school, Conway argues, is a valuable antidote to the test-based reforms of recent years. Shawn Healy of the McCormick Foundation describes a statewide effort in Illinois to incorporate civic learning into the curriculum via the Democracy Schools Initiative. Healy reminds readers that preparing young people for an active role as citizens in our democracy has long been a guiding principle of public education. Yet the increasingly narrow focus on career skills has threatened this important outcome of the educational system. Democracy Schools are one way of re-emphasizing public education's important function of preparing citizens. A final article, "On Teaching, Without Disciplines," by University of Minnesota history professor Thomas C. Wolfe, imagines possible reforms for higher education. Grappling with the competing forces confronting professors—the centrifugal force of an academic discipline that pulls scholars to communicate with distant colleagues versus the centripetal force of teaching that pulls teachers into the specifics of the classroom—Wolfe imagines a teaching defense, similar to a dissertation defense, in which college professors would regularly discuss and share their evolving teaching philosophies and challenges. Put together, these articles prove that innovative, progressive education reforms are alive and well today, running on a parallel track to the problematic reforms that have received so much attention in recent years.

It is a distinct pleasure to introduce this special issue of *The Councilor* on the topic of education reform past, present, and future. We hope this issue spurs much needed discussion of this issue, in Illinois and beyond.