# Mismatch: Historical Perspectives on Schools and Students Who Don't Fit Them

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*There have always been students who do not meet the educational expectations of their time—students outside the mainstream mold who do not fit dominant notions of success. The differences between schools and these students can be thought of as a "mismatch" between the structure of schools and the social, cultural, or economic backgrounds of students identified as problems. In this essay we examine the history of these students who have not been able to do what educators wanted them to do. We look at how educators have labeled poor school performers in different periods and how these labels reflected both attitudes and institutional conditions. We then summarize four major historical explanations for why children fail in school—individual deficits or incompetence, families, inefficiency in schools, and cultural difference. Finally, we explore what implications this history has for students in the current standards-based reform movement, including implications for social promotion and the age-graded school. To avoid a mismatch in the standards movement, we argue that educators should focus on adapting the school better to the child, addressing social inequalities that extend beyond the classroom, and undertaking comprehensive changes that take no features of current schools for granted.*

Compared to their predecessors, reformers in the standards movement have been making a rather radical argument: that all students can learn and that all students should be held to a high standard of performance. Though many educators have held these beliefs, never before has an educational movement incorporated these tenets so fully into its reform strategy. There have always been children in schools labeled as slow, delinquent, or incapable of learning. They have been held back, put in special classes, tracked, and expelled. Despite the beliefs of the standards movement, though, there will always be a number of children who do not or cannot accomplish what their schools expect them to accomplish.[1] In this way, the standards movement has and will have something in common with every American

educational movement of the past century and a half: students who perform poorly and who fail. These students, we argue, are part of a mismatch between schools and groups of students who do not meet the "standards" of their day. We need to pay attention to the fate of the students in the present mismatch; understanding what has happened to these kinds of students in past educational movements can help us understand what might happen to the number of students who will end up failing in the standards movement.[2]

In the early part of the century, Helen Todd gained firsthand knowledge of what happened to students who were expected to fail. Her work as a child-labor inspector in Chicago required her to go into the factories of the city where boys and girls stripped tobacco leaves, made paper boxes, lacquered canes, and ran endless errands. Despite the boredom of repetitive work, long hours, and miserable working conditions, most of the young workers she talked with did not want to go back to school. In 1909, Todd asked 500 children between the ages of 14 and 16 this question: "If your father had a good job and you didn't have to go to work, which would you do—go to school or work in a factory?" More than 80 percent said that they preferred the factory over the school, the paycheck over the report card.[3]

"School ain't no good," said one. "When you works a whole month at school, the teacher she gives you a card to take home that says how you ain't any good. And yer folks hollers on yer an' hits yer." Another told Todd: "You never understands what they tells you in school, and you can learn right off to do things in a factory." Over and over again the young workers told her that teachers beat them for not learning, or not standing up or sitting down on command, or forgetting the correct page in recitation. "Would it not be possible," Todd asked, "to adapt this child of foreign peasants less to education, and adapt education more to the child? . . . Nothing that a factory sets them to do is so hard, so terrifying, as learning. . . . We do not make our education fit their psychology, their traditions, their environment or inheritance." The students Todd interviewed became labeled as misfits. They were the ones who could not do what their teachers wanted them to do, so their teachers expected them to fail and these students fulfilled their teachers' expectations by leaving schools for the factories.

Over time, educators have identified a number of groups of "problem" students like these: pupils who did not learn efficiently what educators sought to teach; who misbehaved or were truant and delinquent; or who fell behind, were not promoted, and dropped out. In Todd's day, the major targets of concern were the immigrant children, a majority of whom clustered in the lower grades because they failed the annual examinations for promotion from grade to grade. In his book *Laggards in Our Schools*, Leonard Ayres described such children as "thoroughly trained in failure."[4] These

students did not fit the mainstream mold; they did not meet schools' expectations for success. As we see it, these differences between schools and students is based on a mismatch between the structure of schools and the social, cultural, or economic backgrounds of students identified as problems. It is not a problem of individual or cultural deficit, as many educators have argued, but this mismatch has had serious consequences for both individuals and groups of students.[5]

Reform movements have sometimes paid attention to these "laggards" and sometimes not, but when such labels are used to identify students, they are more often than not used to identify non-mainstream students. For example, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) stressed in its title and in its text a *nation* at risk but paid little attention to *children* at risk, assuming that what was needed was a return to academic basics, harder work, more of the same (in the shape of more hours of school, more homework, and longer school years), in the hope that intensifying standard schooling would lead to a more competitive economy. The report showed little awareness that schools as currently organized are much better calibrated to serve privileged groups than groups placed on the margin.[6]

The standards movement similarly uses schools and academic achievement as indicators of the country's health. Though it focuses on raising the bar for all groups of students, teachers, and administrators, it makes few provisions for those students who experience a mismatch with schools. Summer school, retention, and extra work are not going to solve the problems made apparent by the chasm between some students and the educational institutions that are failing to serve them. The push in many urban areas for an end to social promotion as part of the standards movement also punishes the student for failure, with little attention to the structures that might be contributing to student failure. In the words of a recent National Research Council report on high-stakes testing, "the lower achievement test scores of racial and ethnic minorities and students from low-income families reflect persistent inequalities in American society and its schools, not inalterable realities about those groups of students. The improper use of test scores can reinforce these inequalities."[7] The use of these test scores to label and categorize certain students as failures would ensure that the standards movement is a direct descendant of other educational movements that have structured failure, intentionally or not, into their goals.

These historical and current constructions of success and of failure as individual problems have legitimized inequalities by "teaching children to blame themselves for failure."[8] Several contemporary historians have grappled with this concern about the failure of distinct groups of students. Some have been concerned with the class-based nature of school structures and the methods schools have used to legitimize individual differences as a way to channel children of different classes into different types of jobs.[9]

Others have focused on the effects of differentiated curricula and tracking, though these reforms have been some of the ways schools have tried to adapt their structures to different kinds of students.[10] Still others have looked at how schools took responsibility for and have treated students identified as having "learning difficulties."[11] Although these Progressive era structures and special arrangements were meant as an attempt at equal educational opportunity, in many ways they have provided less opportunity.[12] According to one student of these reforms, the educational structure that leads to failure "was made possible only by the genuine belief—arising from social Darwinism—that children of various social classes, those from native-born and long-established families and those of recent immigrants, differed in fundamental ways."[13] On the other hand, these reforms have also provided greater access to schools during periods of great change in the make-up of the student body, even when they did help to create a new underclass. [14] In either scenario, many students were bound to fail, which was usually predictable based on a student's social class or race.

Despite the persistent presence of students who fail, educators in different movements and at different times have framed the problem of this mismatch in sharply different ways. In turn, these diagnoses led to quite different solutions. We are convinced that unless practitioners, policy makers, and researchers question how problems are framed, including misconceptions and omissions, they may implement solutions, like the elimination of social promotion, that may hurt children rather than help them. This essay is an exploration of what has happened to the students who have not been able to do what educators wanted them to do and of what implications this history might have for students in the current standards-based reform movement. To understand how educators have framed these problems of failure and poor school performance, we first look at how educators have labeled poor school performers in different periods and how these labels reflected both attitudes and institutional conditions. We then summarize four major explanations for why children fail in school—who is to blame and why. We suggest that many of the earlier assumptions and explanations have persisted into modern reform periods, even though rhetoric has changed. Finally we argue that educators need to focus on adapting the school better to the child as the most feasible way to remedy the mismatch in public education and to prevent in the standards movement much of the labeling and stratification that has worked to the detriment of students in previous eras. Teaching children effectively will require a thorough rethinking of both the familiar structures of schooling, such as the graded school, and the gap between the culture of the school and the cultures of the communities they serve. Todd had it right, "We do not make our education fit their psychology, their traditions, their environment or inheritance."[15]

## NAMING THE PROBLEM: LABELS, GOALS, AND STRUCTURE

Labels are telling. Contained in names, either explicitly or implicitly, are both explanations and prescriptions. The labels that educators and reformers have given to low-performing students contain important information about educators' and reformers' values about success, social diversity, and individual achievement.[16] They give us some insight in to the discrepancies between school-sanctioned values and the backgrounds of the waves of new groups of students attending school throughout the past two centuries and the changes in the types of mismatch over time. Labels also reveal just how embedded categorization and constructions of difference are in the structure of schooling. Over time, as the institutional structure of schools changed and as bureaucracies evolved and expanded, so did the way educators and reformers thought of the students they served. But the fact that there were students labeled as failures remained constant.[17]

In his illuminating study of "educational misfits," Stanley J. Zehm has compiled a list of the varied names given to children who failed to do well in school.[18] He breaks the categories down into four periods: 1800 to 1850, 1850 to 1900, 1900 to 1950, and 1950 to 1970. Although there is clearly an overlap between the periods in the labels and the explanations they pose or imply, there are, nonetheless, discernable changes in the ways the problem of poor performance is posed.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, when the common school was in its formative stage, writers spoke of the poor performer as *dunce, shirker, loafer, idle, vicious, reprobate, depraved, wayward, wrong-doer, sluggish, scapegrace, stupid*, and *incorrigible*. Although terms like *dunce* and *stupid* suggest that educators sometimes saw low achievement as the result of lack of brains, far more common was the belief that the child who did not do well in school was deficient in character. Underlying much of the rhetoric was a set of religious and moral convictions that placed responsibility for behavior and achievement in the sovereign individual.[19]

The primary goals of the common school of that period were to train the rising generation in morality, citizenship, and the basic skills represented by the three *R*s. Crusaders for the common school shared what later generations might see as a utopian hope: that a relatively brief exposure to the same curriculum might mitigate the advantages enjoyed by the fortunate. In 1830, the workingmen's committee of Philadelphia put the aspiration this way: "Our main object is to secure the benefits of education for those who would otherwise be destitute, and to place them mentally on a level with the most favored in the world's gifts." The common school was to make real "the glorious principle and vivifying declaration that 'all men are born equal.' "[20] More conservative advocates of public education mostly shared the underlying conviction of the workingmen that a proper educa-

tional system—one that mixed together all the children of all the people in a free and public institution—could provide equality of educational opportunity that would lead in turn to fair competition in the quest for achievement in later life. If the young were exposed to this similar opportunity, then it was primarily the fault of individual pupils if they did not succeed academically.[21]

Since the United States was primarily a rural nation in this period, the major agency of public education was the one-room school in dispersed agricultural communities. One should not romanticize the old-time rural school. Children attended class only a few months a year; formal schooling was only a casual and occasional part of their lives. Often the one room school was a battleground of wills between teacher and students. The child who did not learn easily what the teacher taught or who acted up in the classroom might be whipped—in part because of the assumption that the reluctant learner lacked character. A boy or girl who did not do well in school, however, had many other ways of demonstrating competence and achieving recognition. And in the nongraded, informal structure of the rural school pupils could progress informally at their own pace, making "failure" more obscure.[22]

By contrast, failing and passing were defining features of bureaucratized urban education of the latter part of the nineteenth century. To a large degree failure became an artifact of the rigidity of a system that sought to process large batches of children in uniform ways. The age-graded school, a standardized curriculum, and annual testing programs to determine promotion to the next grade were all based on the notion that children could and should be taught the same subjects, in the same way and at the same pace. The graded school separated children into supposedly uniform groups by age and proficiency. Gradation of classes became popular in large part because it promised to emulate the efficiency that came from the division of labor that was appearing in factories and other modern forms of social organization. Educators arranged the curriculum into standardized parts that corresponded with the grades, year by year. At the end of the year pupils took a test to demonstrate that they were ready to move to the next level; success meant moving up the ladder, failure meant staying in place. At the top of the nineteenth century arch of urban schooling was the meritocratic and graded high school. Tests to enter the high school were often very difficult and flunking rates high. Far from defining failures in these examinations as a problem, many educators saw them instead as a sign that academic standards were being maintained.[23]

How did educators of the latter half of the nineteenth century describe those students who did not keep up with the factory-like pace of the elementary grades and the meritocratic competition of secondary schooling? Zehm finds these epithets emerging in this period: *born-late, sleepy-minded,*

*wandering, overgrown, stubborn, immature, slow, dull.* The religious language of condemnation used in the early nineteenth century was diminishing, but the notion that academic failure came from defects of character or disposition continued. If pupils did not learn, it was largely their own fault. From her rich sample of accounts of nineteenth century classrooms Barbara Jean Finkelstein concluded that teachers believed that "the acquisition of knowledge represented a triumph of the will as well as the intellect. Consistently, . . . teachers treated academic failure, not as evidence of their own inabilities as instructors, but as evidence of the students' personal and moral recalcitrance."[24] Increasingly as the century progressed, educators came to associate the character defects of the pupils with the moral and social inadequacies of their families, especially in the case of immigrants.

But some of the terms that educators used to describe poor performers—*immature, born-late, overgrown*—also showed an emerging notion of the *normal* student that automatically made the *slow* student into a deviant category. The normal student was the one who proceeded at the regular pace demanded by the imperatives of a graded school—the batch processing of pupils by the school bureaucracy. The student who was held back was deviant, "retarded," a failure. By the turn of the twentieth century, careful studies of "retardation" showed that a very large minority of students— perhaps one-third—were denied promotion. The result was that the vast majority of pupils were lumped in the lower grades of the system. In Tennessee in 1906 about 150,000 entered the first grade, 10,000 the eighth, and only 575 graduated from high school. Nationwide the comparable average figures for city schools were 1,000 in first grade, 263 in the eighth grade, and 56 in the high school senior class. In Memphis, Tennessee, 75 percent of Black students were held back.[25] Though this system might have appeared efficient to the urban reformers who created and supported it, for vast numbers—especially immigrants, Blacks, and other groups—it was geared to produce failure.

During the Progressive era of the early twentieth century, educators began to question not the age-graded school but the premise embedded in it that in a democracy all students should have the same education. In the name of efficiency and a new concept of equal opportunity, differentiation became the watchword of the day. Educators believed that their new "science," especially the new technology of testing, provided the key to assigning students systematically to different classes and curricula. This took various forms: tracking pupils by "ability" (educators kept the notion that there were "normal" students but added sub-normal and above-normal categories); offering different curricular options like vocational classes and gender segregated courses; and creating a host of new programs for specific categories of students—retarded, physically handicapped, truants, and hard discipline cases, and groups like Blacks, newly arrived immigrants, and

Mexican Americans.[26] Even though some of these attempts to adapt schools to a broader range of talents began as elite programs, like vocational education, most of them soon became educational channels for students who were failing or who were thought to be at risk of failing.

The labels educators used during the period from 1900 to 1950 indicate this shift in the way they conceptualized the "misfits" in the educational system: *pupils of low I.Q., low division pupils, ne'er-do-wells, sub-z group, limited, slow learner, laggards, overage, backward, occupational student, mental deviates, backward, occupational student, mental deviates*, and (bluntly) *inferior.*[27] The message of the labels was clear: There were students who simply did not have smarts, and the pedagogical answer was to teach them different things in a different way in a different place. Older views about poor performers persisted, however, even in an era when the language of science provided a rationale for discriminating on supposedly objective grounds. The notion that poor performers were morally weak died hard. Two experts on scientific approaches to teaching spelling lamented that bad spellers "do not have a spelling conscience. They must come to feel that to miss a word is to commit a real social offence."[28]

Even before the development of group intelligence testing some educators and lay people were beginning to think that there were students who were incapable of mastering the standard curriculum. When these tests were employed in massive numbers during the 1920s, they seemed to confirm the prejudice that there were not only incapable individuals but incapable groups (though even the most enthusiastic testers admitted that there might be talented persons in even the most unpromising ethnic or class groupings).[29] The superintendent of schools in Newark, New Jersey, argued in 1920 that the schools must adapt to provide "equal opportunity" to children who were genetically inferior:

> All children are not born with the same endowments or possibilities; they cannot be made equal in gifts or development or efficiency. The ultimate barriers are set by a power inexorable. There are in the schools tens of thousands of children over age physiologically, but only five, six, or seven years old mentally. The educational system must therefore be adjusted to meet this condition, so that the democratic theory of "equal opportunity" for all may be fully exemplified as well as preached.[30]

In practice, testing was used not so much to diagnose specific learning problems and to devise appropriate learning strategies (surely valuable uses of the new technology of assessment) as to isolate the *ne'er-do-wells* from the mainstream of the graded school for the *normal* students.

As a way of moving large numbers of "normal" students through a standardized curriculum in a fairly efficient manner, the age-graded school had

been a stunning success, and few educators have wanted then or since to change its basic structure. It worked better, however, during an era when academic misfits could and did simply quit school and go to work than during the twentieth century, when compulsory schooling and child labor laws compelled hundreds of thousands of students to continue in schools that were mismatched to their class and ethnic cultures and often scornful about their abilities and aspirations. The administrative progressives used curricular differentiation to protect the pupils in the pedagogical mainstream—mostly middle class—from being "retarded" by the nonmainstreamers. In the process, they marginalized and segregated the misfits, sometimes in programs that were mere holding bins for "laggards" until they could be eliminated from school.[31]

For most of the twentieth century, educators themselves took the initiative in devising solutions to the mismatch of student and school. But beginning in the late 1950s, a new set of actors entered school politics and sought to redefine both the problem and the solutions. Starting with Blacks in the civil rights movement and spreading to other groups—Hispanics, women, advocates for the handicapped, Native Americans, and others—outsiders who had been ignored or underserved demanded new influence over education. These groups rejected earlier diagnoses of the problem of poor performers, especially those that located the trouble in the defects of individuals (whether of character or chromosomes). Instead, they demanded equality of access (as in integration); programs that would equalize resources or even compensate for past discrimination; a broadening of the curriculum to honor the cultural diversity of the society; and various other ways of attacking the obvious and hidden injuries of race, gender, class, and cultural difference. The protesters wanted to adapt the school better to the child and called for a halt in blaming the victim.[32]

Some of the new names reformers gave to children who were not performing well in school began to reflect new ways of seeing. Such terms as these, emerging in the period from 1950–1980, suggested that the blame lay more with the school than with the students: *the rejected, educationally handicapped, forgotten children, educationally deprived, culturally different*, and *pushouts*. But the older habits of thought remained embedded in labels like these: *socially maladjusted, terminal students, marginal children, immature learners, educationally difficult, unwilling learners*, and *dullards*. Such language still located the cause of the trouble largely with the student, though protest groups made educators generally more euphemistic, as in names like *bluebirds* and *less fortunate*.[33]

When educators responded to the demands of protest groups for greater social justice in education, they sometimes based their actions on old diagnoses. Some programs—like pull-out remedial help under Title I—appeared to respond to the need to adapt schools better to "different" children, but

in practice they often continued to segregate and label children, as had differentiation in the Progressive era. Much of early compensatory education was based on a concept of deprivation and cultural deficit rather than honoring cultural difference and sharing power with dispossessed groups.[34] The outsiders in protest movements were not satisfied with such warmed-over solutions, and they raised fundamental questions not addressed by the old diagnoses. They called on federal and state governments and local districts to improve schooling for those who had been cheated in their education. They questioned the use of intelligence tests and the practice of tracking. They illuminated the bias and narrowness of the curriculum and the variety of forms of institutional racism and sexism. They asked why it was that groups like Blacks and Mexican Americans were so overrepresented in classes for the mentally retarded. They called for attention to linguistic and cultural differences and promoted bilingual and multicultural education. In raising such issues they were rejecting the labels that had denigrated their children. They were creating an agenda of change that went beyond efforts to intensify and make more efficient the traditional pattern of schooling and sought to fundamentally reexamine the institutional structures that led to these biases, similar to the kind of reexamination we discuss below.

In each era, educators have used these labels in part to explain away failure. There has always been a reason for failure that, for the most part, has been rooted in individual or cultural deficit. The institution of schooling has won out in each of these eras. Labels have created categories of individual failure and have left school structures largely intact. These labels create a powerful argument for what might happen to the standards movement: Which students will be labeled and how?

These labels also embody certain constructions of failure in different periods, which both reflect and influence the way educators have viewed students and their relationship to schools over time. Whether it was individual inability, "slowness," lack of motivation, or any other kind of implicit characterization in these labels, these judgements and their underlying notions of success and failure indicated to educators and reformers certain ways to explain why students were performing poorly. The next section investigates these explanations more in depth.

## ASSIGNING BLAME

Historically, students, families, inefficiency in schools, and cultural difference have been identified as the sources for failure. In different ways, each of these explanations points to the mismatch between certain groups of students and their schools. Each defines failure as a problem of fit, and the only reform period in which schools did change in response to students—

the Progressive era—yielded less than desirable results for students who did poorly in traditional classroom structures. We first look at four ways educators and reformers have assigned blame for failure. We then propose a different historical explanation that locates this problem in a mismatch between students and the structure of schools and in schools' resistance to adapting to the changing needs of their student populations. We also consider how the current standards movement might reinforce existing age graded institutional structures.

A.   *Students who do poorly in school have character defects or are responsible for their own performance.* As the previous section demonstrated, locating responsibility in the individual—a response with deep roots in American ways of thinking—has been the dominant way of framing the problem.[35] In the educational system of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this manifested itself in a focus first on character deficiencies, which reformers believed children could overcome, and later on students' low IQs, which students were thought to have no control over. Labels like *ne'er-do-well, sleepy-minded,* and *limited* exemplify this way of thinking about students.

In the nineteenth century, when notions of "intelligence" and cultural differences were rudimentary, educators typically explained poor academic performance in terms of flawed character: The student was a *shirker* or was *depraved.* Individual-based solutions flowing from this explanation centered on the ability of teachers to exhort or coerce the lazy or immoral children to achieve at a higher level.

In the twentieth century, when the "science" of education informed professional decision making, educators leaned heavily on psychological interpretations for school failure, primarily low I.Q. and inadequate motivation. This science of individual differences led to new responses: using intelligence tests to segregate pupils into different tracks or curricula presumably adapted to their talents; altering expectations for performance and seeking to find different motivations and incentives for different kinds of pupils; and, when all else failed, eliminating misfits from the mainstream by assigning them to special classes or letting them drop out at the earliest opportunity.

The belief that the school system was basically sound and the individual was defective in character, genes, or motivation has persisted. Current proposals requiring students to attend summer school or other remedial programs as part of the elimination of social promotion is consistent with framing the problem as an individual student's responsibility.

B.   *Families from certain cultural backgrounds prepare children poorly for school and give them little support for achievement as they pass through the*

*elementary and secondary grades.* Some of the moral complaints against children in the nineteenth century spilled over to their parents: Parents were intemperate, ignorant, undisciplined, and unfamiliar with American values and customs. In the twentieth century, with the rise of social science, finger pointing became less moralistic. But still families were the culprit in theories that stressed the culture of poverty or the supposed cultural deficits in parents who produced seemingly unteachable children.[36] Some of the labels used for students in these periods have some implications for families as well; if a child was *wayward* or was a *laggard*, why didn't the parents do anything to address these problems?

If families were to blame for the academic inadequacies of their children—and this was a popular theory—it was not entirely clear how schools could improve parents. One solution was to create in the school a counterculture that would overcome the defective socialization children received at home. An extreme example of this way of thinking can be found in the attempt of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to place the younger generation in boarding schools far from their communities.[37] A more common strategy was to "Americanize" the children of immigrants in the hope that some of their acquired learning would rub off at home. The kindergarten, in particular, targeted immigrant parents as much as five-year-olds.[38] Some city school systems sought to give adults special training, to work with settlement houses, and to use community schools as centers of "Americanization." Litigation to force parents to obey compulsory school attendance laws concentrated on urban immigrants.[39]

C.   *The structure of the school system is insufficiently differentiated to fit the range of intellectual abilities and different destinies in life of its heterogeneous student body.* In the Progressive era, many reformers argued that high rates of failure stemmed from the rigidity of the standardized curriculum and rigidity of age grading and promotion in schools. They did not frontally attack the graded school *per se*, for it had served their purposes well for the majority of students. Rather, they argued that a single, lockstep course of studies produced failures because not all students were capable of studying the same subjects at the same rate of progress.[40] Schools would have to adjust to accommodate the *low-division pupils, sub-z group,* and *occupational students.*

This interpretation of failure obviously was closely related to the first—the explanation of failure in terms of individual deficits. It focused, however, on institutional changes that would leave intact the basic system of age-graded schools while finding places where the "laggards" could proceed at a slower pace and often in a different

direction from the "normal" students. The remedy, then, was a differentiation of curriculum, grouping, and methods of teaching. This search for organizational causes and solutions led to ability grouping in elementary schools and to specialized curricular tracks in high schools, coupled with an apparatus of testing and counseling. Only rarely did such administrative changes reveal an understanding of cultural differences or conflicts of value between different segments of society. Rather, as one phase of a top-down drive to make schools "socially efficient," it was a fundamentally conservative movement that took as a starting point the assumption that educational planners should find a place for the misfits and prepare them for their likely (subordinate) roles in later life.[41] It reified categories like "slow learner" or "hand-minded" or "ne'er-do-well" and attempted to find appropriate institutional niches for them. This differentiation often entailed watering down the standard curriculum for the "laggards" or assigning them to an inferior and segregated position within the system.[42]

D.   *Children often fail academically because the culture of the school is so different from the cultural backgrounds of the communities they serve.* This interpretation places the responsibility for school failure not on culturally different families and individuals but rather on the schools themselves, arguing that it is the schools, not the clients, that should adapt to social diversity and the *forgotten children, culturally different*, and *pushouts*. Early advocates of this perspective, like Leonard Covello, Principal of New York City's Benjamin Franklin High School, argued that schools should be community-based and responsive to the different ethnic and class backgrounds of the students and families. Covello attacked the cultural bias in I.Q. tests, for example, objected to the assumption that Italian-American youth in East Harlem chiefly needed vocational education, and claimed that the curriculum should reflect the linguistic and cultural traditions represented in the community.[43] Covello's community-centered school is one example of an attempt to remedy the mismatch between school structures and students.

The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s heightened awareness of the multicultural character of American society and the culturally monochromatic environment of most schools. In this view, the standardized age-graded school was insensitive to low-income ethnic and racial minorities and largely unconsciously embodied the dominant ethos of middle-class, White, Anglo-Saxon values, attitudes, and behavior. Intent on imposing (through teachers, curriculum, and daily routines) mainstream culture on the children, such schools displayed little respect for differences in language, beliefs, and customs.[44] In this view, teachers were often unconscious of the ways in which they

served as agents of a rigid cultural system geared to standardizing their pupils. Constantly correcting nonmainstream children's speech, as if to say that there was only one acceptable way to speak in any situation, is one example of this rigidity. The teachers unwittingly became active agents in creating student failure. As a result class-rooms became cultural battlegrounds in which teachers communicated lower expectations, failed to connect with their culturally different students, and thus contributed to low academic performance and high dropout rates. The analysis of cultural bias and rigidity led to solutions that focused largely on making the curriculum more multi-cultural, increasing the cultural sensitivity and knowledge of teachers, and building school programs around values that reflected those of surrounding ethnic communities.[45]

Each of these different diagnoses of poor school performance led to different conclusions. Blaming the individual student or the family provided an alibi, not a solution. Blaming the rigidity of traditional education for its lack of proper niches for the "ne'er-do-well" exposed institutional faults, but it led to policies that all too often sequestered the misfits in an inferior and segregated corner of the system. Spot-lighting the gaps between the culture of the school and the cultural backgrounds of students provided a useful corrective to the earlier ethnocentric explanations that blamed the students and parents, but the cultural conflict explanation typically did not question the basic structure and processes of schooling. Focusing on the cultural biases of teachers ran the danger of personalizing the answer: What was needed was more sensitive instructors (but where were they to come from and what were they to do once in the classroom?). Enriching the curriculum by adding Black history or bilingual strategies of instruc-tion was surely an improvement, but such attempts to make schools multicultural typically were just that: additions to a familiar age-graded pattern of instruction, not recasting the character of the institution.

The standards movement departs from these previous explanations in the way it frames students and performance, but not in the solutions it offers students who do not fit its structures. Note that almost all of these previous problem definitions and the solutions they generated left the core structure and assumptions of the institution—in particular the age-graded school as the chief building block—basically untouched. Although the admin-istrative progressives did recognize the regimentation inherent in tradi-tional graded instruction, they solved the problem of the misfits not by questioning the assumptions underlying the age-graded school but by mak-ing new niches for the unsuccessful. The standards movement, though, questions the assumptions if not the structure of schooling, arguing that all

students can be held and should be held to high levels of performance. The contrast is striking between current reforms, in which all students would ideally get the same curriculum (though this is not always the case), and the nineteenth century, when individual students were judged on their character or individual ability, or the Progressive era, when reformers were proud of finding a different niche or a track for every student. The problem is now that the structure of schools still does not allow for the variety of students and the variety of areas in which they might excel. As a result, students who do not excel in the age-graded, narrowly academic world may once again be subject to the same kinds of labeling and failure that their predecessors were.

The pedagogical assumptions and practices embedded in the urban age-graded school—the scheduling of time, the segmentation of the curriculum, grouping according to notions of "ability," annual promotions, elaborate bureaucratic structures of control, and views of learning, teaching, and knowledge—remained largely unquestioned throughout the century. There were consequently not many options for solutions outside this structure. We see a continuation of this today with standards-based reforms focused on requiring low-performing students to do more during the school year and during the summer or repeat a year of school rather than questioning why these students are failing and what structures in their schooling lead to failure. The standards movement, admirable in its goal of raising the bar for the entire educational system, must ask how it can ensure that this mismatch does not continue to let success elude large groups of students, many of whom live in impoverished urban and rural districts. The focus must be on what happens to the students who do not fit the mainstream academic mold and how school structures can change to meet their needs.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Thus far we have argued that American public schools have always included large numbers of children who do not meet schools' expectations for success. There never was a golden age when educators held the key to success for all pupils, and there will, we imagine, always be children who will not fit the educational structures of their day. As labels and diagnoses shifted over time and as the social constructions of success and failure changed, people fixed on partial solutions or were more concerned with excuses than with rethinking schooling for such students in a comprehensive way. They focused more on the student side of the school-student mismatch than on refashioning the school to fit the children. One reason is that for a majority of students—the middle-class mainstream—the standard form of schooling worked reasonably well, and the political power lay with them rather than with the outsiders.

Recent reforms around raising standards have maintained the structures that are working for the middle-class mainstream students and are still for the most part focused on the student side of the equation. These reforms include many high-stakes consequences for individual performance, most notably placing students in tracks, withholding promotion, or preventing graduation for failing grades.[46] California, Delaware, South Carolina, and Wisconsin have had current plans to end social promotion, but there are only thirteen states that require and fund programs to help low-achieving students meet state standards.[47] There is little evidence to support this strategy of eliminating social promotion. Studies have shown that children who are held back tend to drop out more often than those who are not held back and that students learn more if promoted than if retained.[48] Reformers and policy makers are pushing children further out of the mainstream by holding them back.

Policy makers' focus on promotion and retention in the standards movement is to some extent misguided. There is less thought given to who is failing, why they are failing, and what schools can do about this failure than there is to political strategy and accountability for accountability's sake. The students who are suffering are the same students who have felt the brunt of the school-student mismatch in the past: poor and minority children. It is not the White, middle-class students who are suffering from high-stakes strategies. Michelle Fine once wondered, though, what would happen if failure were the rule in schools that serve White, middle-class boys and girls: "How would federal and state governments respond if 50 percent of White, middle-class students dropped out of high school? Would they increase promotional standards, toughen testing and standardization, cut access to school lunches, reduce student options in coursework, and make it harder to graduate? Or would they reassess the policies, structures, and practices of educators?"[49]

We think it is important to ask what the legacy of this history of failure and of mismatches is: What will happen to the students who experience a mismatch in the standards movement and what will ultimately happen to the movement itself? What does it mean to say that all children can learn and at the same time create severe penalties for failure through high-stakes accountability? We don't see failure going away any time soon. We imagine that there will be new kinds of labels for the students who fail to meet high expectations in the standards movement. Maybe they will be similar to the individual deficit explanations of the nineteenth century or maybe we will revert to the cultural deficit arguments of the mid-twentieth century if ethnic or racial groups fail in large numbers. And what if we find that not all children can reach the same high standard? Will that mean the end of the movement or will it mean that students are punished even more for not performing?

The history of the education of students in this mismatch underscores three points relevant to the standards movement. One is that most efforts have concentrated on fitting the pupil to the school or on supplying alibis for the mismatch rather than looking to institutional factors to explain failure. The second is that broader social inequalities must be addressed in conjunction with failure and discrepancies in schools to give students their best shot at success. The third is that reforms have mostly been piecemeal and disconnected rather than comprehensive and coordinated. Standards-based reform has been assembled into a coherent design, but without alignment with other kinds of change that children need for success. In addition, proposals for reform have spilled forth from all sides of the political and pedagogical spectrum.

If our analysis is convincing, three policy implications might follow that would help the standards movement learn from the history of mismatches. One is that hard as it may be to change the school to match the student, it is a more promising strategy than trying to fit the student to the school. A second would be to acknowledge and address social inequality by tempering some of the high-stakes features of the reforms and to link up with other social reform movements, particularly in inner city neighborhoods. Poorer neighborhoods by definition have fewer resources than their wealthier suburban counterparts and in many cases have a harder time meeting standards because of this. The last implication is to undertake comprehensive changes that take no features of current schools for granted. Humans have created the structure of schools and humans can change them, however much the status quo seems to be etched in stone.

## FITTING THE SCHOOL AND THE SCHOOL SYSTEM TO THE STUDENT

Consider features of urban education that have typically been taken for granted but which in the present time may be dysfunctional. One of these is the age-graded school itself, preserved amid almost all reform movements (true, there was a brief attempt to create "ungraded" classrooms in the 1960s, but this was largely unsuccessful).[50] From the age-graded school flowed many institutional arrangements: a self-contained classroom with one teacher and a group of students of comparable age and, supposedly, of academic attainment; the isolation of teachers from one another in their workplaces; a sequential curriculum, often cut up in distinct segments; an expandable structure in which classrooms could be added to one another in an "eggcrate" building that could reach a size so large that staff and students often knew only a fraction of the school "community"; the notion that there was a normal progression from grade to grade, sometimes enforced by competency testing for promotion.

Although such an organization for teaching was probably an improvement over the chaotic nonsystem it replaced, it is apparent that if one were to start anew in designing a school, some of these features would hardly recommend themselves, at least for nonmainstream children. For example, the 1988 Carnegie report *An Imperiled Generation* recommended that urban schools should be nongraded for children who now attend kindergarten through fourth grade and that a "transition school" of flexible years and schedule replace the current high school. In addition, Kentucky's reforms under the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) use primary units (K–3) instead of grades. We have already suggested that the notion of "normal" progress from grade to grade was an invention that produced failure for some students as a necessary consequence of its own rigidity. Learning should be a series of personal benchmarks toward a larger set of goals, not a public display of passing and failing. If schools are really to be communities—an idea brilliantly described by John Dewey in *School and Society*—it is clear that they should be much smaller than most urban schools and offer much more opportunity for collaboration among teachers and continuity of instruction for teachers and the taught.[51] Specialization of high schools by curricular tracks puts the burden of integration of knowledge on students and divides curricula—and hence students—into hierarchies.

Like the age-graded school, bureaucratic governance of urban schools is an abiding legacy of the past. In its origins it represented a dream that experts could design and control a "one best system," free from input from local lay people. This separation of the planning of instruction from its execution—administration from teaching—led to the paperwork empires and fragmented centralization characteristic of many urban systems today in which accounting often takes the place of adaptive planning.[52] Again, few educators today would willingly recreate a system of control that produced such red tape and distractions from the real work of teaching (though vested interests protect the bureaucracy). Instead, those who would adapt schools to the urban communities they serve commonly argue for much greater school site control and input from parents. As school leaders like Leonard Covello have shown, really adapting the school to the cultural backgrounds and values of the communities they serve requires a high degree of self-determination and flexibility at the local level.[53] To put such "wisdom of practice" into effect demands freedom from the legacy of centralized control.

## EXAMINING BROAD SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

As the National Research Council's report on high-stakes testing suggests, the use of these tests has the potential to reinforce social, racial, and ethnic inequalities. By forcing large numbers of urban youth to attend summer

school or to repeat a year, and by placing these youth at risk of dropping out, high-stakes strategies in the standards movement are doing a disservice to many students. These reforms are anchored in narrow conceptions of how to understand success and failure. Students might flourish in one arena and not in another. For example, students who do not do well in academic settings might be great athletes or conscientious community members or outstanding artists. The standards movement does not have the capacity to capture all of these different ways of succeeding and, as a result, might contribute to the social inequalities already found in inner-city communities.

Promotion and retention are not the responsibility of individual students alone. There are whole systems involved in the fate of any one student, and the poorer urban students are the ones suffering at the hands of high-stakes measures. Although all children can certainly learn, they have a harder time doing so in schools that are falling down and that have teachers teaching outside their specialty or in communities where there are empty lots and high crime rates. Failure is just as much a result of these conditions as it is of individual factors.

Some possibilities for addressing broader social inequalities in addition to educational inequalities include schools and community development groups working together to address neighborhood conditions or engaging in reforms like Beacon schools that bring schools and community organizations together in a shared governance structure to operate community centers after school and on weekends, focusing on comprehensive and healthy youth development as well as community-building work.[54] Schools could also engage students themselves in the work of their community, as Leonard Covello did, to get them to recognize and address inequalities in their own communities.

UNDERTAKING COMPREHENSIVE CHANGE

As suggested by the other two policy implications, change that is done in isolation—focused on the confines of the school campus or only on the changes that might occur within individual students—will fail for its short-sightedness. Whole schools, whole systems, whole neighborhoods must change to reap the benefits of educational reform. The characteristics of a reformulated, standards-based education we have been describing exist in scattered places where administrators, teachers, and parents work together to support all children. Such efforts alter what happens routinely in schools and demonstrate a willingness to question what is now taken for granted. But such successful programs typically lie at the periphery; the core urban school systems remain largely untouched by these efforts. The challenge is to develop a comprehensive vision of what effective schools could be and

do and to win the political support that might transform them, over time, into reality.[55]

The standards movement does not have to be part of the legacy of this history of failure and mismatches. A reform like Covello's community-centered school suggests alternative ways to frame student success and failure and rethink how schools can fit the educational needs of students. Reflecting on his work in a public school for boys in East Harlem, Covello wrote,

> To me, failure at any age . . . is something the seriousness of which cannot be exaggerated. Forcing a boy who is an academic failure, or even a behavior problem, out of school solves nothing at all. In fact, it does irreparable harm to the student and merely shifts the responsibility from the school to a society which is ill-equipped to handle the problem. The solution must be found within the school itself and the stigma of failure must be placed in a boy as seldom as possible.[56]

He respected and attended to the cultural background of his students while maintaining high expectations for their academic achievement. He also went to great lengths to involve the community in the life of the school and involve the school in the life of the community by addressing housing concerns in the community, encouraging his students to work with community groups, creating a community center next to the school, and establishing an Old Friendship Club for boys who had already dropped out of school. Through these efforts, Covello demonstrated that it is possible to create a school structure that supports success rather than failure and brings together academic standards and nonmainstream students. With attention to the policy implications discussed above and with its worthy goals of getting all students to learn at high levels, we believe the standards movement might be able to achieve some of this success.

*Notes*

    1   For a full treatment of arguments about the dilution of curriculum since the early twentieth century and the case for raising standards of performance, see David L. Angus and Jeffrey E. Mirel, *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890–1995* (New York; Teachers College Press, 1999); Diana Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Ravitch and Maris Vinovskis, eds., *Learning From the Past: What History Teaches Us About School Reform* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

    2   For a discussion of current structures of failure in school systems, see Raymond P. McDermott, "Achieving School Failure 1972–1997," in George D. Spindler, ed., *Education and Cultural Process: Anthropological Approaches* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1997).

    3   Helen Todd, "Why Children Work: The Children's Answer," *McClure's Magazine* 40 (April 1913): 68–79.

    4   Leonard Ayres, *Laggards in Our Schools: A Study of Retardation and Elimination in City School Systems* (New York: Survey Associates, 1913): 200.

5   Although it is clear that not all immigrants, working-class students, or students of ethnic and racial minority groups did poorly in school or were subject to this mismatch, the majority of the students who were labeled failures did come from these groups. This incongruity cannot be applied as a blanket explanation across the United States and across time, either. Local variation and significant differences between urban and rural schooling surely had an impact on how and whether this mismatch manifested itself in local communities. We think it is important nevertheless to take note of this inconsistency in an era when high standards, test scores, and strict accountability measures threaten the welfare of students who might still be feeling the impact of this mismatch.

6   National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform: A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education* (Washington, DC: Author, 1983).

7   National Research Council Committee on Appropriate Test Use, *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999).

8   Michael Katz, "Education and Inequality: A Historical Perspective," in *Social History and Social Policy*, David Rothman and Stanton Wheeler, eds. (New York: Academic Press, 1981): 91; David Tyack, "Constructing Difference: Historical Reflections on Schooling and Social Diversity," *Teachers College Record* 95 (Fall 1993): 9–34.

9   See, for example, Michael Katz, *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

10   For example, Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

11   Barry Franklin, *From "Backwardness" to "At-Risk": Childhood Learning Difficulties and the Contradictions of Reform* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

12   David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

13   Oakes, 35.

14   Barry Franklin, "Progressivism and Curriculum Differentiation: Special Classes in the Atlanta Public Schools, 1898–1923," *History of Education Quarterly* 29 (1989): 571–593.

15   Todd, 74, 76.

16   See Tyack, "Constructing Difference" on social diversity and values.

17   For another discussion of the impact of labels for low achieving students, see Franklin, *From "Backwardness" to "At-Risk."*

18   Stanley J. Zehm, *Educational Misfits: A Study of Poor Performers in the English Class, 1825–1925* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1973).

19   Ibid., Appendix A.

20   Quoted in David B. Tyack, ed., *Turning Points in American Educational History* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1967): 145, 143.

21   Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

22   Zehm, *Educational Misfits*, chapter 2; Wayne Edison Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

23   David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); William Reese*, The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1995); Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); Maris Vinovskis, *History and Educational Policymaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

24   Barbara Jean Finkelstein, "Governing the Young: Teacher Behavior in American Primary Schools, 1820–1880: A Documentary History" (Unpublished dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1970): 134–35.

25    Ayres, *Laggards in Our Schools*, 3, 14, 72, 88.

26    Lewis Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916); Terman, *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization* (Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book, 1922); Paul Davis Chapman, *Schools as Sorters: Lewis M. Terman, Applied Psychology, and the Intelligence Testing Movement, 1890–1930* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

27    Zehm, *Educational Misfits*.

28    Quoted in Zehm, *Educational Misfits*, 200.

29    Terman, *The Measure of Intelligence*; Terman, *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization*; Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas, and Joel Spring, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973).

30    Oscar T. Corson, *Our Public Schools, Their Teachers, Pupils, and Patrons* (New York: American Book Company, 1920).

31    Tyack, *The One Best System*.

32    William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); Robert G. Newby and David Tyack, "Victims Without 'Crimes': Some Historical Perspectives on Black Education," *Journal of Negro Education* 40 (Summer 1971): 192–206.

33    Zehm, *Educational Misfits*.

34    Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, part 3.

35    See Tyack, "Constructing Difference" for discussion of individual versus group identity in the history of education and social diversity.

36    Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*; Terman, *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization*; Karier, Violas, and Spring, *Roots of Crisis*.

37    See David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995).

38    Marvin Lazerson, *Origins of the Urban School: Public Education in Massachusetts, 1870–1915* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

39    David Tyack and Michael Berkowitz, "The Man Nobody Liked: Toward a Social History of the Truant Officer, 1840–1940," *American Quarterly* 26 (1977): 321–354.

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41    Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Changing Conceptions of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909).

42    William H. Dooley, *The Education of the Ne'er-Do-Well* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1916).

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44    John Ogbu, *Minority Education and Caste* (New York: Academic Press, 1982); Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Elizabeth Eddy, *Walk the White Line: A Profile of Urban Education* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967); William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982); Raymond P. McDermott, *Kids Make Sense*, Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1976.

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46    National Research Council, *High Stakes*.

47    Robert C. Johnson, "Turning Up the Heat," *Education Week*, January 11, 1999; National Research Council, *High Stakes*.

48   Robert M. Hauser, "What If We Ended Social Promotion?" *Education Week*, April 7, 1999.
49   Quoted in M. Sandra Reeves, " 'Self-Interest and the Common Weal': Focusing on the Bottom Half," *Education Week*, April 27, 1988, 21.
50   John Goodlad, *The Non-Graded Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987).
51   Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909).
52   John W. Meyer, *The Impact of the Centralization of Educational Funding and Control of State and Local Organizational Governance* (Stanford: Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, 1980).
53   Covello, *The Heart Is the Teacher.*
54   See Lisbeth B. Schorr, *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997).
55   Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *An Imperiled Generation: Saving Urban Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988).
56   Covello, *The Heart Is the Teacher*, 124.

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