

Try, Try Again

Forced busing didn't work the first time

All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice

by Richard D. Kahlenberg

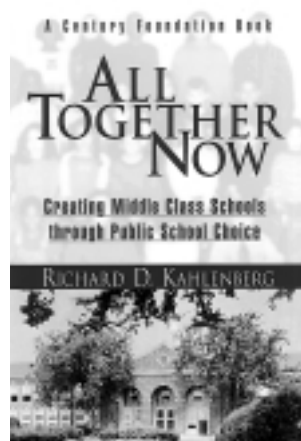
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As reviewed by John F. Witte

Richard Kahlenberg makes the kind of very clean and uncompromising argument typical of believers in forced desegregation, whether based on racial or, in this case, economic status. The same is often true of promoters of school choice, among both private and, as in this case, public schools. The book not only makes a clear argument but also recalls a very rich political and scholarly period in the history of American education. It brings us back to *Brown v. Board of Education* and forward to *Abbott v. Burke*, the New Jersey Supreme Court decision holding that an “adequate” education, as required by the state constitution, requires a certain level of per-pupil funding. It links James Coleman’s seminal report on education and poverty to the latest findings on school choice and to some of the economics literature on educational achievement.

The argument of the book can be stated as a series of propositions, with the material in brackets added by this reviewer:

- The American educational system is considerably segregated by economic class [and race].
- Students in schools with large majorities of disadvantaged students [who are disproportionately likely to be racial minorities] do poorly on measures of educational achievement, and their schools are likely to have higher rates of disciplinary problems.
- In what is known as the “peer effect,”



poor students [and minority students] do better in schools where the student body is more middle class [white].

- Therefore, the way to improve the educational achievement of poor [non-white] students is to desegregate schools by economic class [race].
- Public-school choice can create a cer-

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tain socioeconomic balance within schools with minimal conflict.

My use of brackets attempts to emphasize that this argument is something of a reworking of the racial desegregation arguments that prevailed from

the 1960s through the 1980s. This is not to imply that the original argument can simply be readjusted in light of the failure of the desegregation movement. This is to emphasize that one cannot simply “find and replace” race with economic class. Sadly, they are not the same.

In Kahlenberg’s opinion, the primary means for achieving economic integration while avoiding the controversy of racial integration is controlled choice. Controlled choice requires all parents to choose schools, often within “subdistricts” that are defined by their racial and economic mix of students. The district then assigns the children, taking into account a range of factors: parental choice, economic integration, racial integration, distance to school, and school enrollments. Ideally, transportation is provided to all students.

The problem with districts in which a majority of the students are low income is the need to add middle-class students. Kahlenberg claims these districts account for only 14 percent of all districts, but this understates the problem: these districts represent considerably more than 14 percent of the nation’s students. In addition, Kahlenberg’s “ideal solution” is district consolidation, which he implies is a viable alternative given our 70-year history of consolidation. However, this would obviously require consolidating inner-city and suburban districts. There is no political comparison between that type of coercive consolidation and the consolidation of small rural districts, and even that was hard-fought in many states. I cannot imagine a legislature in this country authorizing such consolidation unless the districts voluntarily came forward.

A personal note may emphasize the depth of the problem of integrating inner-city and suburban districts. In my first foray into education policy in the mid-

1980s, I led a study of the Milwaukee metropolitan public school districts. The commission for which I served as executive director of research was established as an attempt to forestall a lawsuit by the Milwaukee School Board intended to force metropolitan racial integration. The commission failed; the lawsuit went forward and was settled out of court by extending an existing voluntary city-suburbs exchange program.

During the deliberations concerning the commission's report, I became an advocate of a proposal to divide the Milwaukee School District (100,000 students) into between eight and ten pie-shaped districts extending from the Milwaukee inner-city to the suburbs. The idea was to integrate based on socioeconomic status. In part the rationale was based on a "tipping theory" hypothesis for schools that Kahlenberg supports. I am still convinced that the theory is correct—that when the share of a school's students who are disadvantaged reaches 60 percent or more, the focus, morale, and educational environment shift dramatically. Teachers have reduced time to teach, are forced to teach many remedial courses, and generally seek to leave; middle-class parents of all races do the same.

What is telling for Kahlenberg's recommendations is the reception that greeted these proposals. I gave three speeches in the Milwaukee suburbs promoting the plan. The response wasn't frigid; it was blatantly hostile. No arguments could overcome the hostility, though I explained how not all kids would be bused to the inner-city; how magnet schools would be used (the mid-1980s version of choice); and how extra resources could be provided. After an absolutely dead-on-arrival reception in the legislature, the plan was dropped and has never reemerged in any fashion.

I am not as persuaded as Kahlenberg is by the peer-effect data showing, he claims, that economic integration supports achievement, but I generally agree with his goals and his solution. The problem, unfortunately, is that it is not prac-

tical in present-day America. Because of our geographic segregation by class, students will have to be bused and some, if not many, will have to be coercively bused. Busing has never been popular, and there is no reason to believe it will be more agreeable when the focus shifts from race to economic class.

The case studies of economic desegregation in the book's last chapter are dominated by a city in my state, La Crosse, Wisconsin. I am familiar with that case and a parallel case Kahlenberg mentions in Wausau, Wisconsin. The problem of extending La Crosse as model for the larger problems of inner-city education in America will be obvious to most readers. La Crosse has a wide middle-class majority and to most observers would be mistaken for a suburban school district. The minority population is 12 percent Asian (mostly Hmong) and 3 percent black. Wausau, in the northern, rural area of the state, actually has an even larger Hmong population in the schools, 24 percent. Even with these small minority populations, the conflict generated in these cities over efforts to move students to achieve economic balance in the schools was considerable. In Wausau, as Kahlenberg dutifully notes, the attempt to "integrate" led to the defeat of the school board and the replacement of the district superintendent. The La Crosse effort was more successful, but not without strife.

My point, and I hope it is debated rigorously, is that substituting economic assignment for racial assignment will not fool anyone. Magnet schools failed to save racial desegregation; it's unclear why, in light of this failure, wider choice options would promote economic desegregation. As the La Crosse plan attests, and as controlled-choice options based on race (such as that in use in Boston) confirm, unless neighborhoods are economically integrated, the only way to facilitate desegregation is through some coercive element, such as quotas. La Crosse is not a large city, yet school population "targets" were still needed. There

is no evidence that cities in America are willing to accept forced busing based on either race or economic status.

I share Kahlenberg's goals, and at one time I favored his solution, but I doubt that his proposal has any chance of working in the near future in America.

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As reviewed by John E. Coons

A half-century of court orders has dismantled the legal regimes of racial segregation without achieving much integration in the schools. It was right for the justices to declare the principle of *Brown v. Board of Education*; perhaps it was right to attempt heroic remedies that would challenge sheer physical separation. However, the law has failed and today is in retreat toward its de jure redoubt.

Richard Kahlenberg attributes much of the law's failure to its very focus on race. The real problem, he claims, is consistent segregation by family income or wealth. In America a child's classmates tend to come exclusively from his own social class. Focusing on the incendiary racial hook has distracted us from this more fundamental pathology.

Kahlenberg persuades us that children from the bottom third of society's economic ladder simply do not prosper academically when they are taught in homogeneous platoons conscripted from the neighborhood. They can learn, however, when some stroke of luck enrolls them in a mostly middle-class school. Afforded the influence of bourgeois peers, they transcend the limits of the urban classroom—and they do so without systematic injury to their middle-class schoolmates; the poor win, and the rich don't lose. This premise whets the author's legal appetite for a "right to attend middle-class schools."

One could question such a right while affirming this general rebuke to the system. The social balkanization created by

government schools renders them both inefficient and thoroughly undemocratic. In this country the middle class simply buys the schooling it prefers, shopping for it in the clumsy but effective real-estate market that sells state-run education. But while the middle class maneuvers, the rest of America is herded. Their schools are labeled “public,” but this is a name hijacked from more democratic state enterprises to which all have access. Unlike the street, the library, the public park, or the museum, the school maintained by the state excludes the family that cannot afford to be its neighbor. The result: Beverly Hills and Grosse Pointe are private in all but name. The liberal’s calling is not to reform the public school, but at long last to create it.

Kahlenberg styles his crusade “economic integration,” meaning that there should be a substantial presence of non-rich children in schools that carefully maintain a middle-class majority. He ponders a possible constitutional claim to such an environment, but little in federal doctrine suggests it. Of course, judges (state as well as federal) can have exotic insights, and lawyers will suggest them. Kahlenberg will not object: “Court decisions are less democratic, but . . . the judiciary should promote certain important principles.”

Happily for this reader, the bulk of the book centers not on the courts but on politics and democratic values, at least as the author understands them. Prudent programs of economic integration could, he argues, fetch the allegiance of a middle class that has nothing to lose and a conscience to quiet. The ideal design of any such program, however, proves enigmatic and elusive, most evidently in Kahlenberg’s nervous probes toward parental choice. Repeatedly the book seems poised to consider choice for the poor as a distinct and substantive objective. In the end, however, it provides only scraps of the various theories that might justify choice as an independent value.

All Together Now cannot make these foundational arguments because it views

choice merely as one instrument of the grand objective, economic mixing. Hence the book’s mantra is not choice, but that opaque locution, “controlled choice.” Its reports of successful integration involve marginal and attenuated forms of parental freedom. The flagship example is La Crosse, Wisconsin, where the primary means of integration was the redrawing of attendance zones. Kahlenberg is comfortable with coercion of this sort even in his endorsements of charter schools; these should be made available, he says, where choice will contribute to the proper mix of rich and poor.

This helps to explain the book’s neglect or superficial treatment of a generation of proposals that honor both integration and choice as strong yet dis-

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tinct values to be pursued simultaneously. Chosen integration is substantially more humane and stable than any potpourri achieved by command. The two objectives can be natural allies. Indeed, since 1969 scholarly models of family choice have consistently stressed both values by including rules ensuring that state and participating private schools alike will share in the integration of the social classes. In those cases where the legislative models are designed to make children from all economic levels eligible for vouchers, the means of integration have varied from full and partial admissions lotteries to modest set-asides of a portion (often 20 percent) of a school’s new admissions for low-income applicants. Such admissions policies would be coupled with a rule that either

forbids tuition beyond the amount of the state subsidy or requires that any charges be means-tested. The grant or scholarship must also be large enough to stimulate the formation of new private schools without the need for tuition supplements. Otherwise they are useless to the poor once the existing private schools are filled. Finally, the state must ensure appropriate transportation and information for low-income families

The three legislated systems of choice now actually operating (in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida) all deploy these “controls” or their equivalents, even though children from low-income families are their targeted and primary beneficiaries. The programs there are achieving substantial economic integration in private schools and in charter schools that have been created by the states to face the new competition. There is a distinct possibility that, under such programs, even government schools will become authentically public.

In light of this distinctly liberal history and practical experience, why does Kahlenberg repeatedly engage in the unscholarly and misleading bashing of vouchers? For example, “Vouchers have failed because they generally produce greater socioeconomic concentration not less; divert funds to the wealthy; and will further divide Americans by race and religion.” What can this possibly mean? In our entire history, no voucher system has existed other than the three now operating. Is the Milwaukee system, in Kahlenberg’s terms, “a tool by the right wing to undercut public education,” one that diverts money to the wealthy? Quite the contrary. In fact, Wisconsin has provided the poor their first experience of an integrated and truly public education. Moreover, it has shown the families there the fundamental respect that also can justify their trust—and that of their children—in a democratic order.

—John E. Coons is a professor of law emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley.