book review

Still Dreaming
The quest for equal opportunity continues

The American Dream and the Public Schools
By Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick
Oxford University Press, 2003, $35; 301 pages.
Reviewed by William A. Galston

In The American Dream and the Public Schools, Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick offer a panoramic view of American public education and the efforts to reform it. Just a list of key chapter headings and topics—desegregation, finance, structural reform, school choice, inclusion—reveals the book's ambitious scope. It might be described as a literature review with attitude.

The attitude—the use of the “American Dream” as the central analytical concept—will be familiar to readers of Hochschild's previous work. At the core of the American Dream is equality of opportunity, a notion that artfully blends both collective and individual responsibilities. The role of government is to provide everyone with a fair chance to pursue success. Individuals then use this opportunity to go as far as their talents and drive will allow.

Public schools are the principal vehicle for translating the dream into reality. However, while the authors briefly acknowledge that progress has been made, the thrust of their argument is that the efforts to promote school desegregation and equitable school funding have failed thus far.

For the most part, Hochschild and Scovronick blame this reality on the unwillingness of better-off families and communities to approve adequate transfers to the worse-off. In the absence of such transfers, the intergenerational transmission of advantage will continue unabated, with ever more damaging effects in a society whose rewards are increasingly keyed to the attainment of education and the possession of higher-order skills.

It would not be unfair to describe Hochschild and Scovronick as bloodied but unbowed 1960s liberals. Their hope is for a system of public education in which children of all races and classes learn side by side, in classrooms equally endowed with key resources. This hope is unattainable, they believe, unless citizens strike a balance between self-interest and the common good. “Too many Americans,” they write, “are unwilling to take the required risk, pay the necessary price, or surrender their initial advantage.”

Important parts of this thesis are undeniably true. Efforts to reduce school segregation have stalled, as has progress toward eliminating achievement gaps between white students and most racial and ethnic minorities. Income and wealth are less equally distributed than they were 30 years ago. But can these realities be reasonably attributed to a collective failure since the 1960s to fund the public schools? My reading of the evidence says no.

Consider the following: Not only has inflation-adjusted spending per pupil nearly doubled since 1970 (and tripled since 1960), it has also become substantially more equal across jurisdictions. According to figures from the Department of Education and the Census Bureau, the ratio of spending between the median school district and school districts in the 75th and 90th percentiles has decreased, while the ratio between the median and the 10th and 25th percentiles has increased.

Citing the research of William Evans and his colleagues, Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips conclude in their 1998 volume The Black-White Test Score Gap, “Despite glaring economic inequalities between a few rich suburbs and nearby central cities, the average black child and the average white child now live in school districts that spend almost exactly the same amount per pupil.” This is what we would expect in light of the fact, cited by Hochschild and Scovronick, that the states’ contribution to K–12 education funding has risen by 10 percentage points over the past three decades, a trend that tends to lean against local inequalities.

Much of the increased spending has gone to reduce class size; the average pupil/teacher ratio has fallen from more than 22 in 1970 to roughly 17 today.

This book suffers from a persistent underestimation of the role of culture in shaping behavior.

www.educationnext.org
Here again the process of equalization is evident. Harvard University scholar Ronald Ferguson has shown that average pupil/teacher ratios are unrelated either to the racial composition of schools or to the percentage of students eligible for free lunches (a standard proxy for family income).

None of this is to deny that additional resources for lower-achieving schools and districts could be beneficial, especially if these resources were invested in policies with a strong research base, such as smaller classes and four-year-olds can attend preschools, regardless of family resources, if their parents choose to send them. (In fairness, I suspect the authors would agree with this recommendation.)

Third, this book suffers from what might be termed liberal materialism—that is, a persistent underestimation of the role of culture in shaping individual behavior and social outcomes. For example, rigorous research has found that income plays only a minor role in explaining the black-white achievement gap. Factors such as parenting practices are far more significant. Another example: the authors cite the overseas schools run by the Department of Defense to support the thesis that a high level of racial integration boosts minority achievement. Maybe so. But they overlook an obvious alternative hypothesis—namely, that a military culture focused on discipline, respect for authority, and merit is disproportionately beneficial for minority students, especially when it is reinforced by similar attitudes among their parents.

The authors offer a clear, challenging argument and mobilize a mountain of evidence in its support. But every social scientist knows that confirming evidence can be found for nearly any hypothesis. The harder task is to expose one’s cherished theories to challenging evidence and to remain open to a range of alternative explanations. The American Dream and the Public Schools is a superb brief for the traditional liberal interpretation of the ills of our education system. But one need not be a conservative to believe that it is far from the whole story.

—William A. Galston is a professor in the University of Maryland’s School of Public Affairs.

**Eye of the Beholder**

*Private and public schools, close up*

**All Else Equal: Are Public and Private Schools Different?**

By Luis Benveniste, Martin Carnoy, and Richard Rothstein


**Reviewed by Paul T. Hill**

All Else Equal’s central claim is that privately run schools are not always good, a truth with which even the most fervent advocates of school choice would agree. Being a school of choice, and therefore subject to competition and market forces, is not enough.

The authors reached this conclusion after interviewing principals, teachers, and parents in 16 California public and private schools, spending extra time in 8 of the schools. Their small sample of schools was further stretched so as to compare private versus public sponsorship, elementary versus middle schools (the sample included no high schools), and higher- versus lower-income stu-