

Excerpted from  
*A Notion at Risk: Preserving Public Education as an Engine for Social Mobility*,  
Richard D. Kahlenberg, Editor

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# **A NOTION AT RISK**

  

## **PRESERVING PUBLIC EDUCATION AS AN ENGINE FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY**

**Richard D. Kahlenberg, Editor**

**A CENTURY FOUNDATION BOOK**

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## FOREWORD

**C**apitalism and democracy owe a large measure of their dynamism and success to the fact that, while they do not prevent substantial inequality, they do offer extensive opportunity for upward mobility. The United States, where the rags-to-riches story remains a national fable, provides what is probably the best historical manifestation of this phenomenon. Even today, Americans enjoy a potential for upward mobility that is unusual by international standards, but the advantages available to the rich and wellborn also are numerous and noticeable.

In the public sector, for example, the log-cabin-to-the-presidency version of reality is scarcely the norm. Indeed, as this is written, the presidential contest is between the son of a president and the son of a senator. And, generally, there is a strong correlation between income and election to high public office. Although there are complaints about this state of affairs, Americans seem remarkably complacent about the prominent place of money and position in their politics. In private life, however, Americans still hold tightly to the notion that there should be ample opportunity for movement well up the economic ladder for all citizens. Any evidence that this part of the American Dream is at risk or in decline is likely to be disquieting to citizens.

One of the twentieth-century keys—perhaps the central one—to achieving upward mobility in the United States was the public education system. Thus, data suggesting that American education, in some cases, is having the effect of reinforcing existing inequalities is real cause for alarm. One of several pieces of evidence pointing to this disturbing

conclusion is a recent study that found that the reading gap between the average student in high-poverty and low-poverty schools—measured in terms of relative standing on a percentile scale—starts at twenty-seven points in first grade and grows to forty-three points by eighth grade. Such studies call into question the whole notion of an educational dynamic of opportunity and highlight the necessity to reform our weakest public (and, for that matter, private) schools.

Findings such as these already have given rise to intense concern and debates between conservatives and liberals, with each group, not surprisingly, offering quite different solutions. Conservatives put forward ideas such as private school vouchers that are based on an underlying belief in less government and more markets. Progressives advocate a response based on an underlying philosophy that government action is essential for overcoming social problems, arguing for more resources and more reform within the public school system. In the heat of argument, both sides sometimes seem to lose touch with a significant reality: there is good evidence that the nation's public schools are performing as well as or better than ever (and even that most parents are happy with their children's schools). Still, many of our schools in high-poverty areas are performing miserably, so miserably that few readers of this volume would send their own children willingly to such schools. Those are the kinds of schools that are not providing the first steps so necessary to upward mobility.

Although much of the analysis has wider applications, this volume focuses on the needs and shortcomings of urban public schools, especially those in poor neighborhoods. The authors offer numerous wise observations about our schools today and a strong set of recommendations about how to make them better. While they scarcely speak with one voice, taken together the volume gives a practical and thoughtful view of some of the best ideas about school reform currently under discussion. Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation, organized and edited the volume. His introduction provides a useful overview of the topic, as well as a road map to the essays that follow, which explore teaching, school financing, summer school, discipline, charter schools, standards, and public opinion—all examined through the lens of inequality.

Over the years, The Century Foundation has supported a number of projects on American education, including Warren Bennis's *The Leaning Ivory Tower* (1973); *Making the Grade*, a 1983 Task Force Report on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy; and *Facing the*

*Challenge*, a 1992 Task Force Report on School Governance. We recently have reinvigorated our education efforts with the publication of *Hard Lessons: Public Schools and Privatization*, by Carol Ascher, Norm Fruchter, and Robert Berne (1996); Richard Rothstein's *The Way We Were? The Myths and Realities of America's Student Achievement* (1998); and Gordon MacInnes's white paper, "Kids Who Pick the Wrong Parents and Other Victims of Voucher Schemes" (1999).

In the coming months, we will be releasing a full-length book by Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Brookings Institution Press), and two volumes edited by Gary Orfield, one examining Title I reform, the other exploring the effects of high-stakes testing in public education. Other Foundation projects under way include a working group on inequality in K-12 education, a Task Force on Low-Income Students in Higher Education, and two book-length projects, one by Richard Rothstein and James Guthrie on school financing, the other by Joan Lombardi on child care policy and educational opportunities.

RICHARD C. LEONE, *President*  
The Century Foundation  
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