

Many Children Left Behind

How did American education become so unequal?

By [Megan Erickson](#)

June 29, 2021

June 29, 2021



A classroom at Mildred Avenue K-8 school in Boston. (David L. Ryan / Getty)

One year after America's public schools were forced to go remote overnight in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we know that students have lost time with teachers, friends, and extended family; have lost the daily interactions with crossing guards, cafeteria cashiers, and other workers who once seemed like a small part of their lives but are now starkly missed; and have even lost loved ones, financial security, and health—as well as, we are told, “significant ground” in learning. Above all else, what the pandemic revealed about our educational system is that public schools provide far more than they should, serving as “the great equalizer” in an increasingly stratified society—serving in fact as welfare states, as health care facilities, as child care centers, as sources for counseling and for free breakfasts and lunches.

As we begin to reopen our society with the worst of the pandemic likely in our past, we are thus left with a question: Should we continue to task schools with serving as our primary social safety net for young people, with the hours of instruction received by students now standing in for the redistribution of wealth, or should we take seriously the holistic needs of students as human beings and citizens of a democracy? The summer of 2020 was an opportunity—mostly missed—to reimagine what schools could and should be like: moving some classes outdoors to give kids back their urgently needed recreational time and renovating buildings to provide beautiful, functional spaces, for instance. The need for smaller class sizes to enable social distancing could have led to demands to hire more teachers and reduce class sizes permanently, a measure that could not only put students one to two months ahead in content knowledge but also revitalize their engagement and deepen their relationships with their teachers. But instead of reckoning with the real social and emotional crisis facing school children, many administrators and think tanks opined about “learning loss,” or the number of instructional minutes students missed in math and reading—especially the poor and working-class children who are most “behind.” Thus, as society reopens, children will face, along with the economic and emotional consequences of the pandemic, “high hurdles” in making up these math and reading deficits, according to the thought leaders who measure them by standardized test scores.

No one has yet spelled out how falling behind an estimated one to five months in instruction could rob children of their future, because most people understand there is no need to elaborate on an article of faith. The most radical proposal for reimagining the structure and content of education to come from a government official was New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's cynical bid to preempt teachers (who, he implied, could be removed from the classroom thanks to technological advances) and ignore the wishes of students and parents entirely by turning over the future of the schools to billionaires like Bill Gates and Eric Schmidt, formerly of Microsoft and Google.

Exactly whom education should serve, as well as how and for what purposes, are the central questions raised in Christina Viviana Groeger's new history, *The Education Trap*. A study of the transformation of informal education and the rise of formal education in the city of Boston, Groeger's book doesn't answer all of these questions but instead seeks to remind us that more hours spent in the classroom does not necessarily equal a brighter, more egalitarian future for all. She also reminds us that schools cannot be considered, as Barack Obama once put it in a State of the Union address, “the best anti-poverty program around.” That is the role of social programs that actually redistribute wealth, not of children burdened with the expectation to study their way into the ranks of the elite.

Groeger's choice of Boston is fitting, given its role as a pioneer and site of struggle in the expansion of educational access throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. The home of Harvard University and educational reformer Horace Mann, Boston is also where the first legal challenge to segregation in the United States was raised and shut down in favor of “separate but equal” schools and where, years later, the effort to integrate the city's school system through busing was met with violent protests. It is, in other words, a case study in the apparent contradiction between a citizenry with among the highest average years of schooling internationally by the age of 25 and one that still experiences some of the highest levels of inequality and lowest levels of social mobility in the Global North.

Starting her story in the late 19th century, Groeger explores the American education system as we know it today, from its Progressive roots and rise during the Gilded Age to the Great Depression, by which point formal education had replaced kinship networks, charity, and unregulated institutions and served as the primary route to employment. Though this transformation opened up new economic opportunities, it did not necessarily produce economic advancement, Groeger observes. Even worse, by making the schools one of the few means to resolve a vast number of social problems, the American education system has turned the youngest and most vulnerable among us into lab rats for every ideological trend and political scheme meant to secure American competitiveness, efficiency, and global dominance.

Already a subscriber? [Log in.](#)

To find a time when education was not seen as the primary way to secure a job or level the playing field, Groeger reaches back more than a century to when the shift from craftwork to factory work began to remake the US economy. With this monumental economic change came all sorts of social changes as well. American society and culture began to move away from tightly organized and exclusionary ethnic and family-based networks toward similarly exclusive but far more contingent ones created by both a national economy and increasingly powerful federal and local governments. These social changes also marked new innovations in education. With the onset of industrialization, learning on the job was soon replaced by trade schools, charity-run vocational training programs, and for-profit and nonprofit commercial schools. Public secondary schools also began to proliferate throughout the country.

For many working-class Americans, the formalization of education offered the possibility of economic opportunity—and certainly the vision of a more just society, in the case of free public schools—while placing the burden for economic advancement on the individual rather than on society. But for wealthy Americans, this posed a threat to their unquestioned grip on the institutions of learning. As Groeger notes, in 1880, Boston Latin—the oldest public school in the country and one of the most elite—found it necessary to move from the city’s North End, which had become a neighborhood of working-class immigrants, to the South End, a residential district lined with rows of brick Victorian townhouses. Likewise, as more and more working-class families sent their children to the city’s public schools, the Boston elite—perhaps worried that free public education would undermine the social order on which their wealth depended, or perhaps merely reluctant to rub shoulders with the masses—shipped their children off quietly to private boarding schools in the insulated wilds outside the city.

New, often unregulated institutions that sought to educate and enrich an emerging working and middle class became instruments of social mobility for these newly ascendant classes. But they also reproduced and solidified other hierarchies, Groeger writes, by undercutting worker power and moving craft training away from the shop floor. Most important, she argues, they promoted the notion of “merit” as a way both to open up schools and to explain away the extraordinary disparities between economic winners and losers that these new formal institutions of education produced. (“Be quick to recognize merit and the labor agitator will find it difficult to get your workmen to exchange their independence for a union card,” noted one manufacturer in 1906.)

Like Obama nearly a century later, Progressive-era reformers insisted that educational uplift was the best anti-poverty program that a capitalist system needed. Through vocational education, the working poor could gain the skills to bootstrap their way up to well-paying jobs. Low wages were not a sign of a broken distributive system but instead signified the “value” of those who performed unskilled labor. Raising wages thus called for raising the status of work through training and professionalization in philanthropist-run vocational schools. Presaging today’s charter school proponents, these reformers insisted that the self-improvement of society’s most vulnerable was the antidote to social ills, not a more fair and equal distribution of society’s wealth and power—and also like today’s charter school proponents, they sought to erect barriers to their new institutions of social uplift for those deemed unworthy of help.

Far more successful and enduring in its legacy than vocational schools was commercial education, which trained retail, office, and industrial workers. In 1906, the mayor of Boston argued that the city’s commercial dominance would be won first and foremost by the youth in schoolrooms, invoking the battle metaphors that often signify the involvement of business in education (and which would later be echoed by the Reagan-era “Nation at Risk” report). At the time, less than half of office and sales workers over the age of 20 had a high school education; by 1940, 85 percent would. Though the “business training revolution was a quiet one,” Groeger attributes the early 20th century surge in public high school day enrollment to a widespread demand by workers and employers for publicly subsidized training in corporate practices like accounting, which seems warranted given that a majority of female high school students and a large percentage of male ones were enrolled in the commercial (versus the college prep or industrial) education track. Women and second-generation immigrants in particular used formal education to obtain jobs in the business world. For many working-class families, entering the fields of clerical and sales employment represented a step up into the middle class, yet “still-classic scholarly portrayals of white-collar work such as C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar* neglect the role of women and downplay the sense of achievement of many who were able to access this work,” Groeger writes.

More often than not, however, hiring managers continued to select and promote workers based on traits associated with ethnicity, race, and class rather than their hours of schooling or their technical skill. Groeger finds that only 12 percent of women office workers surveyed at the time found their jobs through a school placement bureau, while 40 percent did so through a friend or relative. And “[despite] historically high levels of educational attainment among Boston’s Black youth”—who were more likely to attend school than white working-class children—“virtually no companies hired African Americans, other than a few Black-owned businesses.” Questioned about the qualifications for her job, one secretary said (it can only be read dryly) “chronic cheerfulness.”

“Cheerfulness” and “good character” are, of course, in the eye of the beholder, and working-class Eastern and Southern European women were seen by employers as unrefined, undainty, and lacking in either category. And when limiting access to jobs through outright discrimination failed, white male Protestant elites did so through pay scales and promotion ladders that had little to do with educational attainment but served to stratify workplaces into low-paid clerical workers and their higher-paid, more respected managers. The conditional nature of employment had the added benefit for employers of discouraging union organizing efforts. The fact that these strategies persist and are recognizable to us today should lead us to question whether these kinds of worker trainings are an effective tool for achieving social and economic equality.

While also framed in the language of uplift and meritocratic achievement, the new systems of higher education that emerged in the 20th century proved to be even more of a challenge to the American ideal of economic advancement. Here, too, despite the lofty liberatory rhetoric espoused both then and now, colleges and universities in Boston worked primarily on behalf of the wealthy, giving them an edge in navigating the worlds of business, teaching, and law and undermining the working-class and marginalized communities within the city.

College placement offices in Boston shaped the employment options of graduates, agreeing on the meaning of “merit” in almost conspiratorial harmony with corporations, so that ultimately, as Groeger points out, the same degree could have a much different value depending on the student. In one letter from the Harvard Alumni Placement Service to Kidder, Peabody and Co., a placement officer writes, “Although his scholastic achievements have not been outstanding, his extra-curricular activities provide testimony to his personal characteristics and are evidence of his standing among his classmates,” showing that popularity was prized above academic excellence. Naturally, businesses also wanted to be assured that they were hiring a so-called company man, not a rabble-rouser or someone who would otherwise not fit in. As another letter from the Harvard placement office put it: “It has, of course, occurred to me that you may not react favorably to Woodhouse’s record on account of his race. I realize that it is difficult to imagine a native of India being particularly successful in working with New Englanders. I want to reassure you...Woodhouse is extremely attractive and has made good with all kinds of people around here.” As for the man who majored in English literature but continued to speak “the language of the small town machine-shop,” such a person could not be helped: “In no outward respect is he a college man.”

That Harvard was still admitting 90 percent of its applicants as late as the 1940s shows just how much the cost of a private education barred entry for those deemed undesirable to the upper class and the upper ranks of the professional classes, but what is less well-known is how private universities opposed working-class demands for free public education. The founder of one night law school (accurately) accused Harvard Law of jealously guarding its degree-granting power out of fear that its “spineless

aristocrats” would run into competition from his own school’s graduates. As in business and law, education elites reinforced their position at the top in the face of expanding access to their field by introducing expensive credentialing requirements intended to deter, exclude, or relegate to the lower ranks even the most knowledgeable and experienced women, African Americans, and Irish Catholics (who were more likely to be working-class) on the apparent basis of merit. One Boston school administrator was so concerned by the growing number of Irish Catholic teachers that he began openly recruiting wealthier Protestant “outsiders” in a bid to find the “best teachers,” arguing that “staff that is recruited all from one source inevitably becomes narrow, conceited and unprogressive.”

In this program of exclusionary recruitment, in which “merit” actually served as a proxy for class, we can see the antecedents of contemporary organizations like Teach For America, which claims to raise the status of the teaching profession by enlisting young, inexperienced graduates from elite universities to teach for two-year terms in low-income public schools. Despite their good intentions and educational attainments, these “corps members” do not perform any better than other novice teachers, and they ultimately weaken worker power by absorbing the mentoring time and resources of lifetime teachers, while making it difficult to build solidarity amid the constant turnover and chaos. And just as working-class Irish American women were mainly to be found teaching the primary grades at the turn of the century, hierarchies in pay continue today, with better wages for those teaching the higher grades as well as for those with advanced credentials. Early childhood teachers receive the lowest pay, and their ranks are composed almost entirely of women, 40 percent of them women of color, compared with about 17 percent of K-12 teachers.

In Boston, as Groeger details, working-class teachers fought unsuccessfully for state-funded teacher training programs, arguing in a 1901 debate with administrators (who they said wanted to model the schools after corporate boards) that the history of education in Massachusetts was that of a class war “waged by the propertied class against the plebeian and working-class women of Boston.” The organization of schools remained centralized in the hands of predominantly white male Protestant “experts,” who exerted their control through highly subjective rating systems that evaluated teachers’ personal characteristics—another prominent feature of education “reform” today. In a 1917 graduation speech, one teacher satirized the Department of Educational Investigation and Measurement:

What do they investigate? Everything—even our most secret thoughts, words, and actions.... What do they measure?... Everything that can possibly be measured is measured.... My friends in the profession no longer eat at noon, for they must save time. One munches a bar of chocolate as she works; another needs only a glass of water and a date to keep alive the spark of life.... Just think what we are coming to! Beware that you do not become a pompous five-foot measuring stick. I am a healthy-looking specimen now, but I feel that I am not long in this sphere. Efficiency takes hold of me.

The rise of job training and formal education in America is, as Groeger observes, “a contradictory process of both opportunity and exclusion rather than a simple story of educational expansion bringing greater equality.” And it helps us explain how public schools today can both broaden and limit our possibilities for the future. The “trap” in Groeger’s title refers to the unique and persistent tendency in the United States to focus on education rather than worker power as a panacea for social ills and economic inequality.

Education is important, and in a democracy, it should be a universal right. It has undoubtedly bettered the lives of some Americans, especially those deemed worthy of merit according to the various strategies devised by education elites for categorizing and sorting students into hierarchies. But it has not always been, and cannot be expected to continue as, the only vehicle for social welfare and human empowerment for the many. It is not a substitute for fair wages, better working conditions, or worker bargaining power, nor is it a path to attaining them. For while the demographic composition of wealthy Americans has broadened over time, today’s more gender-equal and diverse elites continue to employ the same strategies as the 20th-century WASPs to deter economic advancement by the working class, using educational merit as a tool for concealing the real privileges and power that they inherited rather than earned.

Reformers who see more hours spent in the classroom as the best way to address inequality—including the heightened disparities brought about by Covid-19—will inevitably propose (as the consulting firm McKinsey did in a recent report) that we must combat “learning loss” with programs like high-intensity tutoring. These programs sound punishing, and without a more robust welfare state and a set of social democratic institutions, they will not necessarily help our children secure “a bright future.” The brittle vision of whom and what education serves remains almost exclusively defined by managers and employers (and their well-paid consultants) instead of the educators who do the work and the students who are supposed to benefit. It would be a crime to let such a moment of drastic social transformation pass us by without any part of our public schools—their grossly unequal funding, their prioritization of the schedules and needs of adults over those of kids, their dual nature and ambiguous social role in sorting the deserving from the undeserving and the rich from the poor—actually being transformed as well.

[Click here for more information.](#)

[Megan Erickson](#) Megan Erickson is the author of *Class War* and is on the editorial board of *Jacobin* magazine.

To submit a correction for our consideration, click [here](#).

For Reprints and Permissions, click [here](#).

[Comments \(9\)](#)