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# Democracy & Education

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## Public Schools At-Risk

### Examining a Century of U.S. Media Coverage of “Unsatisfactory Student Performance” and the Rise of School Privatization

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#### **Abstract**

Throughout the 20th century, community-owned and operated public schooling was viewed in the United States as an essential mechanism for advancing the country’s democratic ideals, institutions, and economic interests. But the first decades of the 21st century have witnessed a historic shift away from this commitment to public schools, as federal and state lawmakers created taxpayer-funded policies supportive of private school vouchers and for-profit charter schools. The authors examine more than 100 years of national newspaper coverage related to the perennial problem of “unsatisfactory student performance,” particularly changes in terminology used to describe these students and explanations for their “unsatisfactory performance.” A review of this discourse reveals shifting views on the causes of students’ “unsatisfactory performance” in schools and helps illuminate reasons for the nation’s recent turn to the private sector. The authors suggest factors that have contributed to this abandonment by some school reformers, especially rising costs associated with special education, racism related to public schools serving more students of color, and an orchestrated, well-funded effort by advocates of privatization to frame public schools as “failing.” The authors conclude that abandoning public schools will move the United States further away from equality of educational opportunity (a core ideal and requirement of any society claiming to be meritocratic), increase segregated schooling in urban areas, exacerbate the problem of inequality in educational attainment, and reduce community control and transparent governance of their children’s education.

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#### **Introduction: Public Schooling Under Attack**

**F**OR MORE THAN a century, community-owned and community-operated public schooling has served as a foundational institution for American society. Local,

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state, and federal policymakers frequently debated the details of school policy; however, the integral value of the institution itself was never in doubt (Elam, 1984; Kliebard, 1987; Ravitch, 2016a, 2016b; Schiro, 2008). Critics highlighted numerous shortcomings but remained committed to the idea of community-run democratic schools (Apple, 1995; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Pinar et al., 1995).

While a small minority of detractors have long argued that religious and secular private schools better serve America's students (Urban & Wagoner, 2009), it wasn't until the High Court's rulings in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954 & 1955) that privatization gained significant traction in public discourse, as segregationists embraced economist Friedman's (1955) school choice voucher plan (Johnson & Salle, 2004). Friedman and others argued that a nation of privately run schools competing for students and public tax dollars would improve student learning, including the learning of students exhibiting "unsatisfactory performance," especially those living in high-poverty urban areas (Abrams, 2016; Frazier-Anderson, 2008; Friedman, 1955; Klein, 2007; Schneider, 2016). Today's advocates of market-driven charter schools employ this same narrative, asserting these schools "increase student achievement, choice and innovation" (Smarick, 2008; Wells, 2006, p. CY11).

School privatization can be defined as "the allocation of public funds for use by private enterprises for educational purposes" (Frazier-Anderson, 2008, p. 417) and is reflected in legislation that appropriates public monies for privately owned and operated charter schools, secular private schools, parochial schools, and home schooling (Askarinam, 2017; Green, 2017; Malkus, 2017). Until the end of the 20th century, elected representatives at the national level largely ignored calls to provide funding for these various forms of privatized schooling, instead remaining committed to public education.

However, in the last few decades, attacks on public education at all levels have escalated, resulting in federal and state legislation supportive of school privatization. The charter school industry (i.e., schools run by either for-profit or nonprofit private interests through legislative contract) began with one school in Minnesota in 1992 and ballooned to approximately 2,000 by the year 2000 and 7,200 by 2017 (NCES, 2020). Congressional funding of charter schools was central to this expansion; in 1995, federal support totaled \$6 million but increased to \$145 million by FY 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Between 2000 and 2016, while public school enrollment increased by 700,000 students, charter enrollment increased by 2.6 million students (NCES, 2019a), with federal funding for charter schools increasing another 72% between FY 2010 and FY 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019c).

By 2020, all but five states had laws granting charters to privately run schools supported by either state or municipal tax dollars, with additional funding coming from the federal government and private philanthropies (Rafa et al., 2020; Ryan, 2017). Federal support has increased significantly under the Trump administration; his first three budget proposals (FY 2018, 2019, and 2020) each called for \$500 million in charter school grants (U.S.

Department of Education, 2019c), with Congress appropriating \$400 million, \$440 million, and \$440 million, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b, 2018c, 2020). For his FY 2021 budget, Trump proposed a "shell game" of \$19.4 billion in block grants for states to decide how to distribute the money (NCPE, 2020). Additionally, for fiscal years 2020 and 2021, Trump proposed \$5 billion in federal tax credits for private school tuition (U.S. Department of Education, 2019b), saying the Department of Education's top priority is promoting "education freedom" (Office of Management and Budget, 2020). It should be noted that the Democrat-controlled House has supported this charter school expansion for FY 2020 and FY 2021.

Eight states (Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, South Carolina, and Wisconsin) currently offer private school choice programs through tax credits and deductions (Lueken, 2019), and with the allowance of up to \$10,000 annually through tax-free 529 accounts (as part of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, Dickler, 2018), individual states and the federal government now sponsor economic incentives that promote divestment from the public school system. Finally, with the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Espinoza v. Montana* (2020) that struck down constitutional provisions in 38 states that barred the use of public monies for religious schooling (Totenberg & Naylor, 2020), the groundwork has been laid for the destruction of public schooling.

Policymakers who promote privatization as the answer for "unsatisfactory student performance" (Isensee, 2019) fail to acknowledge several underlying factors, including economic disadvantage, rising income inequality, racial discrimination, and school segregation (Carnoy, 2000). Most disturbing, privatizers ignore the fact that charter schools and voucher programs perform no better than public schools on traditional assessments of academic achievement when socioeconomic variables are controlled (Carey, 2017; Lopez, 2014). By closing his eyes to these current realities, as well as to the racist history of school privatization in this country (Whistle, 2020), Trump absurdly claimed that his fight for school choice is "the civil rights statement of the year, of the decade, and probably beyond" (Trump, 2020).

This aggressive support for privatization is occurring in an environment where "all levels of government have failed to implement systems to proactively monitor charter schools for fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement" (Center for Popular Democracy, 2017), including an estimated \$1 billion of federal taxpayer money lost to waste and fraud in charter school administration (Burriss & Bryant, 2019). And evidence continues to mount on the various failures of charter schools (Herold, 2015; Orfield & Stancil, 2017; Prothero & Harwin, 2019; Spreen & Stark, 2014; Sugimoto & Carter, 2015), including high rates of suspensions (Klein, 2016; Losen et al., 2016), high dropout rates (Prothero & Harwin, 2019), discriminatory discipline practices (Sugimoto & Carter, 2015), blatant corruption by administrators (Bodkin, 2020; Chase, 2020; Davis, 2020; Miller, 2020a, 2020b; Miron & Urschek, 2010; Sears, 2020), and an unregulated ability to close their school doors, abandoning children they once promised to educate (Ravitch, 2020a). Nonetheless, lawmakers remain committed to

the expansion of privately run schools, with some now using the coronavirus crisis to push their agenda (Ujifusa, 2020).

This burgeoning support for school privatization radically alters the nation's century-long commitment to using our publicly owned and administered community schools to address whatever (a) economic (Cremin, 1959; Curti, 1959; Katz, 1968; Welter, 1962; Wrigley, 1982), (b) social (Karier, 1975), and (c) geopolitical problems Americans have faced at a given time (Kliebard, 1987; Spring, 2004). Most importantly, this move to privatize undermines America's long-term vision of becoming a democratic meritocracy through equality of educational opportunity (Apple & Beane, 2007; Cubberley, 1934; Dewey, 1916).

Mann's 19th-century vision of a nation of "common schools" providing free public education to all children became increasingly common practice during the 20th century, with broad public support for this new and expensive local and state government responsibility. National commitment to public schooling continued during the post-WWII period through the 1980s, as public schools became linked to American prosperity (Lipset & Bendix, 1992) and were viewed as a first line of defense when dealing with threats to the stability of the country's geopolitical power (Spring, 2004). As a result, public school programming and funding increased at the local, state, and federal levels (Bagley, 1933; Elam, 1984; Hoover, 1929; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; *New York Times*, 1938a, p. 48; *New York Times*, 1957, p. 53; Thompson, 1950, p. A22) and were viewed as an essential mechanism for society's push toward greater economic opportunity, success based on merit, and social justice for all (Spring, 2004).

However, support for public education has waned over the past 30 years, dramatically since the 2008 economic crisis. This radical shift in policy is causing many to ask, "When did Americans stop talking about public K–12 education as the keystone of a strong democracy . . . as the only educational institution obligated to serve every child who appears on the doorstep?" (Barkan, 2017).

### **Why the Attack? Examining 120 years of Media Coverage of "Unsatisfactory Student Performance"**

Many "actors" seek to influence public policy agendas, including the media in its various iterations of print, television, and internet. Because they "screen, select, and recontextualize information they impact the various stages of the agenda setting process" (Fowler, 2013). The media are courted by research organizations and policy advocates that desire to get their message before the public. The media also impact policymakers through their selection of what to emphasize in articles and how to package it in neutral, critical, or supportive language, as well as through op-eds (Malin & Lubienski, 2015). Consequently, analyzing how the media addresses and frames educational issues is important to understanding the politics of educational reform.

To better understand eroding commitment to public schools, we examined more than a century of national media coverage of students exhibiting "unsatisfactory student performance." This rather large and chronic subgroup of school-aged children is frequently the basis of parental and public criticism of their schools. Throughout the century, American leaders struggled

to increase the nation's overall human resource potential; their anxious gaze inevitably and frequently turned to public schooling and the children who did not conform to performance expectations and behavioral norms (Baxter, 2008; Hine, 1999; Lesko, 2001).

The nation's persistent, often alarming, fixation on these students has involved many targeted groups over the past century, including dropouts, truants, the "unruly," students perceived to have academic potential but who "perform" below "normal" on traditional measures of achievement, and more recently, students identified in need of special education. In 1966, for example, there were at least 38 different terms used by professionals and the media to describe children who "performed" below academic expectations but otherwise presented as "normal." School officials were increasingly tasked with finding ways to improve learning outcomes for those identified with "deficits" (Franklin, 1994, p. 65, citing a U.S. Public Health Service Task Force Report).

However, conceptions of inadequate student performance require scrutiny, as any operationalized measure is fraught with cultural, linguistic, economic, gender, and racial biases (Au, 2015; Eversley Bradwell, 2009; Sugimoto & Carter, 2015). In short, definitions of "academic achievement" and associated terminology (e.g., "failing," "gifted," "slow," "backward," etc.) are problematic, with many children unwilling or unable to conform to expectations of privileged White society (Lesko, 2001). Thus, our research does not attempt to articulate any particular "truth" about "academic achievement" or "student performance" in school, other than to say that various measures used over the decades served, in part, as beacons to gaze upon marginalized children who represented larger social, economic, geopolitical, and xenophobic anxieties.

In many cases, newspaper articles and academic studies that focused on students' unsatisfactory performance spotlighted marginalized populations, specifically, children of color, children of immigrants, children living in poverty, and any "others" perceived as a threat to the nation's stability and progress, in effect, employing a circular logic in which one's "performance" in school and marginalizing characteristics were conflated. For example, a study of the school system in Clarke County, Georgia, asserted, "it is to be expected that the negro pupils will show a higher percentage of retardation [slow progression through grades compared to peers]," citing "important differences between the races" as a reason for the discrepancy in performance (Johnson, 1916, pp. 34, 49).

As a result, we cautiously use the term "unsatisfactory student performance" to describe this population of students, understanding that identification of children based on their "performance" in school is a social construct that carries dual meaning, that is, legitimate concerns about student learning and biases and anxieties about the "other" in privileged White society. From this point forward, we will use the identifier "unsatisfactory student performance" without quotation marks, understanding that the label is fraught with significant biases and is used to represent a wide variety of students targeted in newspaper media.

As these identified children came to represent the nation's geopolitical and socioeconomic fears, a "hunt for disability"

(Baker, 2002) took place to protect the “progress” of the “normal” student population and those who performed above expectations (Brodtkin, 1960). As can be seen in Table 1 and Graph 1<sup>1</sup>, between 1900 and the present, language used in the “hunt for disability” changed significantly over the decades.

Other researchers have looked qualitatively at the history of language used to describe these students (Baxter, 2008; Corbett, 1996; Franklin, 1994; Lesko, 2001), but we present, for the first time, quantitative representations of this language change. We organize these changes into three relatively distinct historical periods, documenting along the way the nation’s persistent concerns about unsatisfactory student performance, as well as the escalating criticism of community schools that occurred during the closing decades of the 20th century.

To be clear, we are not suggesting a causal relationship between media discourse about these students and recent school privatization efforts. However, by tracing the nation’s gaze and changing terminology regarding students who exhibit unsatisfactory performance in school over the past 120 years, we hope to identify some of the reasons that opened the legislative door for privatization.

Our research supports the work of scholars who have provided robust rationales for public education (e.g., Barber, 1998; Dewey 1916; Gutmann, 1987; Mann, 1848; Ravitch, 2016a; Stitzlein, 2017), traced the rise of school privatization discourse (e.g., Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Ravitch, 2013, 2020a; Schneider, 2011, 2017; Vergari, 2002), provided archaeologies of labels used to describe children exhibiting unsatisfactory academic performance (e.g., Corbett, 1996; Franklin, 1994; Frenkiewich, 2012; Osgood, 2006; Winzer, 1993), and revealed the persistent racism embedded in our education policies (e.g., Eversley Bradwell, 2009; Kozol, 1985, 2005; Rooks, 2017).

Our purpose is to build on this scholarship by (a) reviewing the history of language used in mass media to describe unsatisfactory student performance, including the chronic struggles of school officials to identify causes and “cures”; (b) showing that recent moves toward privatization contrast starkly with a century’s worth of state and federal policies that relied on public schools for solutions; (c) identifying other factors that have contributed to the recent abandonment of public schooling, including rising costs associated with special education, racism related to public schools increasingly serving students of color, and an orchestrated, well-funded messaging effort by advocates of privatization to frame public schools as “failing;” and, (d) highlighting that this abandonment will move the United States further away from equality of educational opportunity (a core ideal and requirement of any society claiming to be meritocratic), increase segregated schooling in urban areas, exacerbate the problem of inequality in educational attainment, and reduce community control and transparent governance of their children’s education.

By revisiting more than a century of newspaper media descriptions, explanations, and “learning treatments” that have been prescribed for children labeled unsatisfactory school

1 Tables 1 & 2 and Graph 1 are embedded in the text after the methodology section. Table 3 is on p. 8, with the appendix located at end of the text.

performers, we can better understand the current devaluing of public schools and the promotion of privatized schooling. We can also see American schools at their best working to increase equality of educational opportunity, and at their worst when used as mechanisms for segregation and exclusion, deepening the wounds of slavery and maintaining social hierarchies. Finally, we can see how efforts to privatize schooling has moved America back to an era where “separate but equal” is an accepted norm.

## Methodology

The ProQuest Historical Newspapers database was used to find articles that addressed students’ unsatisfactory performance in school in six mass market newspapers.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate the findings, an exhaustive search was conducted using the *New York Times*’ archive. Throughout the 20th century, this newspaper covered local, state and national educational issues, including front-page featured articles, op-ed columns, letters to the editor, advertisements, numerous stories from the paper’s education section, and nationally syndicated articles from the Associated Press. The *New York Times* is also one of only a few mainstream newspapers in the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database that provides uninterrupted coverage from 1900 to the present and, therefore, offers the most comprehensive sampling of public discourse on student academic performance since 1900. We recognize that sampling a mass-market Northern newspaper skews the sample toward segregated White metropolitan populations and learning issues of greatest concern to people living there. Therefore, we acknowledge limitations in generalizing our findings about media discourse, specifically, in rural populations, in segregated schools in the South, and in Hispanic and Indigenous communities.

The terms selected for the *New York Times* archival search were chosen based on a pilot review of six newspapers used to identify terms most commonly associated with unsatisfactory student performance during the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> While the meaning and target subject of some terms changed over time (e.g., “slow learner” began

2 *Boston Globe* (1872–1986, 2008–present); *Christian Science Monitor* (1908–2004); *Los Angeles Times* (1881–1994, 2008–present), *New York Times* (1851–present); *Wall Street Journal* (1889–2000, 2008–present); and *Washington Post* (1877–2001, 2008–present).

3 Students identified in the articles in this analysis were chosen because they were eligible for and enrolled in public schools and in most cases appeared physically and intellectually “normal” aside from their “failure” to “perform” academically. Because most children labeled with developmental delays or physical disabilities prior to 1975 were subject to institutionalization or were enrolled in “special classes” for the mentally or physically “handicapped” (Winzer, 1993), their portrayal in the media had little impact on perceptions of public schools, and therefore, articles on these students were not included in this analysis. However, as we argue, inclusion of these students into “mainstream” schooling after 1975 increased pressure on public schools to help all children succeed academically. Also, we make no claim that the terms analyzed in this study are the only adjectives used to describe students exhibiting “unsatisfactory performance” in school. Instead, they are terms that dominated discourse on “unsatisfactory student performance” in schools during their given eras. The point of this data analysis is to show general trends

as an academic classification for unsatisfactory student performance but by the end of the 20th century was used as an insult for anyone, child or adult, who did not understand a privileged concept), all of the terms, regardless of decade, are associated with some form of perceived learning or developmental “deficit.”

Table 1 displays the number of articles containing a given term in the *New York Times*, with totals reported for each half decade

beginning in the year 1900. Graph 1 displays these same data, including the total number of articles containing these terms for each period. Table 1 also provides the frequency of each term (expressed as a percentage) in relation to other terms used during that half-decade,<sup>4</sup> while Table 2 and Table 3 present data for the 13 special education categories protected by civil rights legislation beginning in 1975. The full scope of attention given to the 13 special

**Table 1. Number of Articles in the *New York Times* Containing a Given Term (January 1, 1900–December 31, 2019)**

Date	“Backward”	“Slow”	“Special needs” <sup>a</sup>	“At risk”	Cumulative
1900–1904	47 (90%)	3 (6%)	0	2 (4%)	52 (100%)
1905–1909	39 (98%)	1 (2%)	0	0	40
1910–1914	168 (99%)	1 (<1%)	0	0	169
1915–1919	142 (100%)	0	0	0	142
1920–1924	181 (96%)	7 (4%)	0	0	188
1925–1929	210 (100%)	1 (<1%)	0	0	211
1930–1934	208 (92%)	17 (8%)	0	0	225
1935–1939	228 (84%)	42 (16%)	0	0	270
1940–1944	47 (52%)	44 (48%)	0	0	91
1945–1949	36 (38%)	58 (61%)	1 (1%)	0	95
1950–1954	18 (11%)	138 (86%)	4 (3%)	0	160
1955–1959	22 (11%)	165 (85%)	7 (4%)	0	194
1960–1964	19 (10%)	179 (90%)	2 (1%)	0	200
1965–1969	16 (4%)	340 (91%)	16 (4%)	0	372
1970–1974	13 (4%)	256 (87%)	24 (8%)	1 (<1%)	294
1975–1979	8 (4%)	78 (41%)	95 (50%)	8 (4%)	189
1980–1984	3 (1%)	114 (50%)	84 (37%)	25 (11%)	226
1985–1989	2 (<1%)	45 (12%)	120 (31%)	220 (57%)	387
1990–1994	3 (<1%)	60 (12%)	155 (32%)	271 (55%)	489
1995–1999	1 (<1%)	37 (7%)	177 (35%)	296 (58%)	511
2000–2004	2 (<1%)	26 (6%)	159 (40%)	212 (53%)	399
2005–2009	2 (<1%)	24 (6%)	234 (52%)	187 (42%)	447
2010–2014	2 (<1%)	22 (6%)	181 (45%)	194 (49%)	399
2015–2019	0	16 (3%)	223 (47%)	231 (49%)	470

*Note.* Data represent search results of ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The *New York Times* with Index, conducted on March 16, 2019. The data for the 2015–2019 period came from ProQuest Digitized Newspapers: The *New York Times* Recent because at the time of the survey, the ProQuest *New York Times* with Index database only covered issues through 2015. The search for the 2015–2019 data was updated on June 18, 2020.

Header terms, with boldfaced percentages, were the most frequently used terms each half decade. A full list of terms, including but not only the most frequently used, are in Appendix A.

a. “Special Needs” was chosen as a term because it became representative of the 13 special education categories protected by civil rights legislation beginning in 1975. See Tables 2 and 3 for more data.

in the discourse, not necessarily to account for every newspaper article about “underperforming” students.

4 The pilot search revealed four main nouns associated with the description of “low academic performance.” These terms were “youth(s),” “student(s),” “learner(s),” and “child(ren).” These four terms, in singular and plural forms, were used in the search field for each of the descriptors

**Table 2. Number of Articles in the *New York Times* That Include a Given Term (January 1, 1900–December 31, 2019)**

Date	“Mental retardation”	“Hearing impairment”	“Deafness”	“Speech impairment”	“Language Impairment”	“Visual impairment”
1900–1904	0	0	6	0	0	0
1905–1909	0	0	6	0	0	0
1910–1914	0	0	19	0	0	0
1915–1919	0	0	13	0	0	0
1920–1924	2	0	26	0	0	0
1925–1929	6	0	35	0	0	0
1930–1934	12	0	36	0	0	0
1935–1939	11	1	62	0	0	0
1940–1944	17	0	23	0	0	0
1945–1949	47	0	36	0	0	0
1950–1954	117	0	51	0	0	0
1955–1959	160	1	55	0	0	1
1960–1964	160	0	48	0	0	0
1965–1969	216	2	55	0	0	0
1970–1974	184	21	79	0	0	1
1975–1979	117	22	126	1	0	11
1980–1984	129	51	142	0	3	8
1985–1989	66	37	106	7	29	26
1990–1994	41	21	108	7	20	24
1995–1999	25	18	103	3	2	12
2000–2004	13	16	58	4	2	5
2005–2009	13	10	51	0	0	6
2010–2014	3	3	33	0	0	6
2015–2018	0	10	39	1	0	5

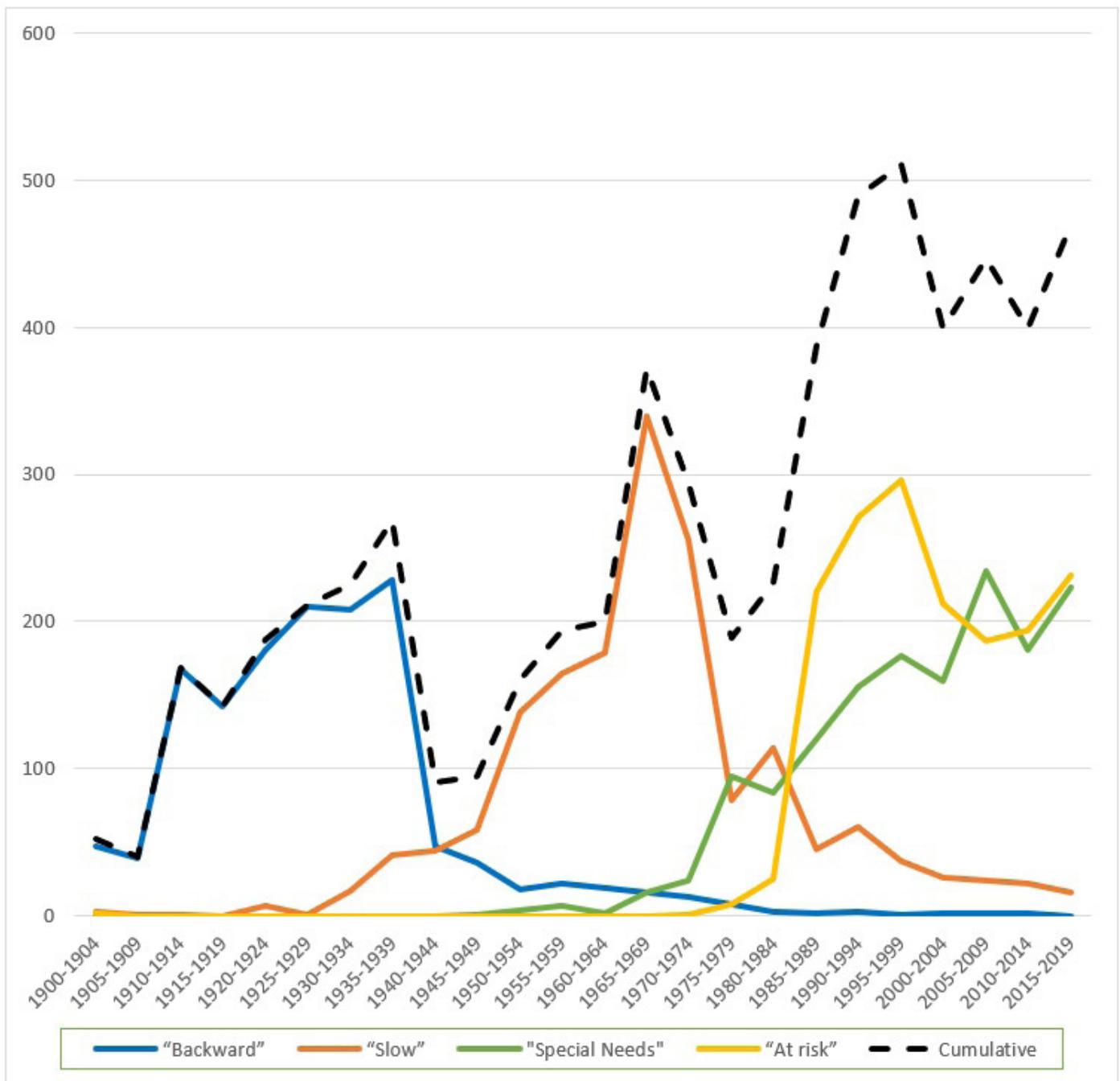
*Note.* The *New York Times* used the term “health impairment” to describe students in only 1 article from 1900 to 2018. However, it should be noted that the terms “ADHD” and “attention deficit disorder,” referring to a medical diagnosis that falls under the classification of “other health impairment,” are used in 406 articles during the 1990s and 540 articles from 2000 to 2010. Those two terms only appeared in 25 articles the decade before. Also note the term “orthopedic impairment” was excluded because it appeared in only 6 articles from 1900 to 2018.

education categories is not represented in Graph 1, as only the term “special needs” is reported, however these data will be discussed in the text. Collectively, these terms underscore the varied and dynamic nature of “academic dysfunction” that school officials were charged with “curing” and, most importantly, reveal the nation’s sustained commitment to public schools for finding solutions—at least until the latter decades of the 20th century.

to provide some level of standardization (Appendix A). The search also includes “non-handicapping” language promoted by the APA starting in 1994 (e.g., “at risk youth” or “youth at risk”).

### **Unsatisfactory Student Performance Through WWII (1900–c.1945)**

The first identified historical period occurs between 1900 and World War II when the term “backward” was used almost exclusively to describe students exhibiting unsatisfactory performance in school (see Table 1). This perceived threat to the nation focused on the offspring of millions who immigrated to American shores looking to fulfill their dreams of economic prosperity (Bagakis, 2018), as well as the children of Black Americans freed from generational bondage under slavery. Populations in Northern cities ballooned due to European immigration and the start of the Great Migration, requiring urban community leaders to create new structures to deal with



**Graph 1**  
 Number of Articles in the *New York Times* Containing a Given Term (January 1, 1900–December 31, 2019)

children who they feared would otherwise turn into vagabonds (Urban & Wagoner, Jr., 2009).

Darwin’s (1859) work “inspired” a generation of policymakers to search for ways to breed out or educate a way through this threat to Protestant Anglo-American culture (Galton, 1883; Spencer, 1864; Thorndike, 1906, 1912). By the early 20th century, many social scientists had combined the discourses of intelligence norming and natural selection into a toxic, racist perspective that framed masculine middle-class White men as guardians of the nation, while anyone else represented a potential threat to the nation’s prosperity (Kevles, 1985; Lesko 2001). As McDermott

(2004) revealed in his fascinating analysis of different conceptions of genius between 1650 and 1900, the project of claiming White superiority was well underway before Darwin; “by 1850, lists of genius were limited to white males from powerful European states” (p. 278).

The publication of Binet and Simon’s intelligence test in 1905 together with Goddard’s and Terman’s American versions in 1908 and 1916, respectively, provided officials with an “objective” means to norm student differences in “academic ability” and to identify the central factor associated with student performance, that is, one’s “intelligence quotient,” or IQ—a single number purported to

**Table 3. Number of Articles in the *New York Times* That Include a Given Term (January 1, 1900–December 31, 2019)**

Date	“Blindness”	“Emotional disturbance”	“Autism”	“Traumatic brain injury”	“Learning disabled”	“Developmental delays”
1900–1904	15	0	0	0	0	0
1905–1909	32	0	0	0	0	0
1910–1914	65	0	0	0	0	0
1915–1919	115	0	0	0	0	0
1920–1924	54	0	0	0	0	0
1925–1929	111	0	0	0	0	0
1930–1934	129	1	0	0	0	0
1935–1939	156	1	0	0	0	0
1940–1944	113	2	0	0	0	0
1945–1949	135	40	0	0	0	0
1950–1954	155	168	0	0	0	0
1955–1959	194	220	0	1	0	0
1960–1964	155	205	3	0	1	0
1965–1969	233	233	29	0	19	0
1970–1974	134	177	53	1	134	0
1975–1979	109	191	136	11	170	7
1980–1984	110	229	140	8	202	23
1985–1989	124	175	143	26	248	28
1990–1994	63	122	104	24	148	19
1995–1999	73	98	167	12	130	15
2000–2004	38	46	185	5	88	10
2005–2009	34	29	250	5	74	3
2010–2014	23	13	216	6	58	2
2015–2019	25	3	173	0	40	0

reflect one’s cognitive endowment and future potential (Burt, 1937). Identifying young people based on “intelligence” served as a sorting mechanism; those with talent could serve military and other national interests, while those with “deficits” would be segregated (Fichandler & Anderson, 1921; Kramer & Johnson, Jr., 1997, p. 37–38; *New York Times*, 1921; Wiggam, 1947, p. 15). However, the cultural and socioeconomic bias embedded in these tests ensured that people of northern European ancestry would, on average, outperform anyone else (Au, 2015). Despite the racist epistemology, education officials eagerly used them to sort students based on their educational “needs” (Au, 2015).

Attempts to explain the etiology of “backwardness” operated within a nature/nurture dualism, with the origin of the problem lodged in either a variety of environmental factors or biologic traits and characteristics (Franklin, 1994). Social reformers such as Galton and Huxley turned to the new biological “science” of eugenics as a rationale and method for breeding out “others” who

were identified by their inability to meet academic and/or social norms (Richardson & Parker, 1993). Sociologist Lester Frank Ward, however, challenged the dominant narrative of social Darwinism by arguing that inequality and one’s social station was not the result of “survival of the fittest” evolutionary determinism, but rather the maldistribution of resources among social groups (Kliebard, 1987).

The label of “backward” was often assigned to immigrant children and children living in poverty as a marker of their perceived difference. Accompanying this label were characterizations of these children as being docile (Goodykoontz 1932, p. E7), unable to learn, delinquent (Goddard, 1914, p. xvi), and a threat to the “Great Chain of Being” (Lesko, 2001, p. 22). Commentators, like this 1927 *Sunday New York Times* writer, explored the challenges of educating the “backward child” who “finds it hard to keep up with his [sic] classes, who baffles his [sic] teacher with subtleties she [sic] cannot understand, who sometimes defies parent

surveillance, spending the night, perhaps, on a park bench . . . playing marbles when he should be behind a school desk” (*New York Times*, 1927, p. X6). The writer also highlighted New York City’s annual expenditure of \$11 million (10% of annual spending on education) toward these students, and spotlighted Elizabeth Farrell, “Superintendent of Ungraded Classes in New York Public Schools,” who requested even more money toward the cause (i.e., hiring 23 additional psychologists, teachers, and medical inspectors). Members of privileged society begrudged those who represented a threat to public safety, hampered national progress, and were a drain on public coffers; nonetheless, consensus held that public schools would provide the necessary corrective actions and resources were appropriated (*New York Times*, 1927, p. X6; see also, Barnard, 1933, p. E8; Davies, 1925, p. XX7; Gillingham, 1913; Guy, 1924; *New York Times*, 1918, p. 37).

*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court ruling that provided legal justification for Jim Crow and segregated American schools, directed education policy for the first half of the 20th century. “Scientific” support for segregated schooling quickly followed in the form of racist, socioeconomically, and culturally biased intelligence testing, resulting in the exclusion of children of color, children labeled “feeble-minded,” and those deemed physically “disabled” from learning in better-funded, White public schools. These schools were a paradox in values; on the one hand, they provided Caucasian children from across the socioeconomic spectrum a mechanism for advancement unmatched anywhere in the world, but on the other, they locked out opportunity for millions of others.

Education “experts” in the early decades of the 20th century, such as Columbia University’s William C. Bagley (1933), recommended segregation for students who exhibited unsatisfactory performance in school and the use of intelligence testing to design new school structures. In experiments, such as that conducted at Columbia University’s “laboratory school” in New York City, school managers divided “bright” and “dull normal” children into homogeneous classes in order to see if segregated learning environments increased or decreased academic performance relative to one’s IQ expectations (Fine, B. 1941, p. D7; *New York Times*, 1936, p. 23; Tompkins, 1936). If IQ tests indicated that “backwardness” and “feeble-mindedness” were biological facts that restricted a student’s intellectual potential, then segregation was needed to maximize the potential of these students and the rest of the population (Burt, 1937, p. 574; *New York Times* 1938a, p. 48; Tompkins, 1936, p. N4; Wiggam, 1937, p. 15). Those who supported this model highlighted benefits to the nation’s economy and to all students, as the curriculum would now be tailored to career paths believed to be best suited to students’ aptitudes and limitations (Kliebard, 1987).<sup>5</sup>

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5 A half century of research has shown that the process of segregating students based on perceived academic ability is fraught with discrimination, whether due to placement in classes not appropriate given students’ current level of academic performance (Grant, 1965, p. A1; Martin et al., 1996, p. 27) or institutional racism impacting the placement of

Throughout the first half of the century, researchers continued to search for the “causes” and “cures” of “backwardness.” Burt’s 691-page tome, *The Backward Child* (1937), explored the causes of unsatisfactory student performance, and he concluded that a child’s general intelligence was the strongest predictor of “backwardness,” followed by, in order of statistical significance, failed memory, irregular attendance, “specific deficits such as poor hearing or impediments in speech,” “backward development of general physique,” “extreme poverty,” and a variety of other “defective physical conditions” (pp. 568–569).<sup>6</sup> Burt’s analysis of these children strongly reinforced a narrative of permanent, biologically-determined educational “dysfunction.” For example, Burt (1921) even claimed that a “mean home” may explain a child’s school attendance because the “home may be mean precisely because their hereditary intelligence is mean” (p. 192). Not surprisingly, Burt (1937) advocated an expedient solution that fit within his chosen narrative: “segregation” (p. 574).<sup>7</sup>

However, by the late 1930s, policies that tracked students into segregated learning environments faced resistance (*New York Times*, 1938b, p. 21).<sup>8</sup> The committee in charge of New York’s segregation experiment concluded that the negative emotional and educational effects on students assigned to “dull” classrooms was not worth the academic gains of other children (Fine, 1941, p. D7; *New York Times*, 1941, p. 25). Reformers agreed that attempts to normalize children identified with unsatisfactory performance through segregation was not the answer, and certainly not worth

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students of color (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Oswald et al., 1999; Skiba et al., 2008, p. 265). Even when the policy of “ability grouping” replaces “tracking,” the practice has mixed results when it comes to learning outcomes, including students’ ontological dispositions regarding their ability to succeed academically (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016; Worthy, 2009). Despite school managers’ best attempts to ease public concerns by using various methods of grouping, problems persisted which further undermined trust in public schooling, especially among people of color (Casey & Levesque, 2018).

6 While Burt devoted an entire chapter to “left-handedness” as a suspected cause of “backwardness,” it did not make the final list of statistically significant predictors (pp. 270–359). In the 1970s, his work was discredited, primarily for fabricating names of research colleagues as well as the data that demonstrated intelligence is primarily inherited.

7 Terms like “feeble-minded,” “imbecile,” “moron,” and “idiot” were used during this period to designate children exhibiting “poor academic ability”; however, these labels are not included in our analysis because they most often referred to students identified with substantial cognitive and behavioral problems (and significantly subnormal IQ scores) and were excluded from mainstream schools. While “backward” children were participants in mainstream public schooling and in segregated schools for Black children, children labeled “feeble-minded” were subject to institutionalization, barred from attending mainstream schools, or isolated within the school system (Franklin, 1994).

8 It should be noted here that efforts to use tracking as a management system continued well through the 20th century despite persistent backlash over the system’s reinforcement of segregation and inappropriate placements (Bowie, 1961, p. C1; Carper, 1965; Hillenbrand, 1956, p. 1; Wilkin 1959, p. 2).

the “heartache and not infrequent tears on the part of both child and parent” (*New York Times*, 1941, p. 25). The researchers at Columbia University found that segregation not only failed to fix unsatisfactory student performance, it contributed to the problem, as the policy reflected forms of hierarchy children experienced in society. A radically different course of action was needed.

During the post-WWII period, the nation’s leaders would increase their commitment to public education and expand access to school regardless of racial or socioeconomic background. A narrative of national progress through public education emerged, one more consistent with the egalitarian and democratic ideals of the Common School Movement. This policy shift faced many challenges, but it would allow for integration of previously excluded student groups, including Black children, and increase resolve to use community-owned and community-run public schools to address other societal issues.

### Unsatisfactory Student Performance During the Cold War and Desegregation (c. 1945–1975)

The horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust silenced proponents of eugenic policies who fashioned the language and characterizations of the “backward child.” Additionally, the fight for Black American civil rights and the Supreme Court’s rulings in *Brown v. Board* that overturned *Plessy* and mandated the elimination of racial segregation “with all deliberate speed” set the American school system on a new trajectory (Aggarwal, 2015), one that would frame the public school as a part of wider social policy aimed at fulfilling the nation’s promises of social justice and economic prosperity for all—not just those able to pass as White.

Escalating tensions in the 1950s and 1960s at home and abroad (e.g., the Cold War’s global geopolitical maneuverings, the nuclear arms race, space race, and the Black civil rights movement), along with the overall quickening pace and demands of contemporary society, led to a new term for students exhibiting unsatisfactory performance in school: the “slow learner.” The nation’s pitched battles and existential fears demanded success on all fronts, including education—and fast! At a time when “fast learners” were framed as “more capable learners” (Johnson, 1956, p. 12) and as the nation’s future “leaders, scholars, and research scientists” (Thompson, 1950, p. A22), those who did not learn at expected rates were labeled “slow” and devalued in society (Apostle, 1969, p. 7).

As can be seen in Table 1, the media term of “slow learner” increased 138% between 1945 and 1954, while “backward” decreased in use 79% between 1935 and 1944 and was rarely used in newspapers after 1950. During the 25-year period between 1950 and 1974, “slow learner” was used in over 85% of *New York Times* articles concerning students exhibiting unsatisfactory performance in school. Like “backward children” of previous decades, “slow learners” remained a threat to the social order and the challenges of dealing with this population of children was well publicized.<sup>9</sup> One exasperated New York teacher “wished . . . that

9 During this time, the term “emotional disturbance” also becomes an educational concern in the media (Table 3). During the 1945–1949 period, this term was used in 40 *New York Times* articles to describe

school boards would amend their pedagogic theories to grant us the right to use chloroform, tear gas, and riot guns [on these students]” (Barber, 1954, p. 203).

Increasingly, the media looked to socioeconomics and failed justice to explain unsatisfactory student performance. For example, the public was informed through print media, as in this 1952 *New York Times Magazine*, that “dunces are made, not born” (Spiegler, 1952, p. SM36). One article in the family section of the *New York Times* cited a claim in the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health that “I.Q. can change” and “children from culturally impoverished homes, or those neglected or ignored by adults, consistently rate low on intelligence tests” (*New York Times*, 1960). Scholarship published in academic journals supported this shift, with one author stating, “The progress of children in school depends more largely upon the family’s socioeconomic status and other influences outside the school situation itself than is generally recognized” (McMillan, 1946, p. 126). Dr. Martin Deutsch, director of the Institute for Developmental Studies and professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College, argued that it was a “core of truth” that the cause of student failure was “all the environment—impoverishment, economic insecurity, segregation, [etc.]” (F.M.H., 1964, p. E7). In short, there was an emerging understanding after World War II that society, not the double helix, was the root of academic failure, and it was the school’s task to “salvage” underperforming students with “programs to fit their needs” (Baxley, 1962, p. 486; Spiegler, 1952, p. SM36; see also *Washington Post*, 1962a, p. A7).

The 1957 Soviet launch of Sputnik, combined with their successful testing of a hydrogen bomb earlier in the decade, resulted in significant media attention placed on American public schools and the need for better student achievement. Americans wondered how a country that was victorious in two world wars could fall behind in the space race. According to *Life* magazine’s editors, this frightening outcome was due to a lack of resources dedicated to public schooling, along with a system that was “kowtowing to the mediocre” (Wilson, 1958, p. 37). Any effective response to this Soviet external threat required school reform that addressed the internal threat of underperforming children.

In 1958, Congress passed the Sputnik-inspired National Defense Education Act. This law provided funding for public school programs in science, math, and foreign languages, and established a framework for creating programs that would identify and support “academically gifted” children. In addition, vocational training would be provided for those not destined for college (Govinfo.gov, 1958). The search was on for a way to ease social anxiety surrounding the “pall of mediocrity” in learning (Mirman, 1969, p. B8). However, for a society now aware of the injustice of de

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students, learners, youth, and children. By the 1950–1954 period, the term was used in 168 articles, reaching a peak in the 1965–1969 period with 233 articles. Diagnosis of “emotional disturbance” becomes associated with unpredictable behavior and “an outbreak of violence in . . . schools, including shootings and beatings” (Lyll, 1988, p. B7), and is perceived to have social causation that school officials were charged with correcting.

jure segregation and recognizing its continued failure to “cure” unsatisfactory student performance, integrated public schools were the answer.

One 1962 commentator, Chester Swanson, executive secretary of the president’s Commission on Vocational Education, fretted that an untreated populous of underperforming children was tantamount to “social dynamite” (*Washington Post*, 1962b, p. C2; see also Everitt et al., 1962, p. 8). Despite clamoring about the dangers of “slow learners” and begrudging the high cost of expanded programming, educational leaders, Congress, and state legislatures overwhelmingly remained committed to community schools as the remedy for unsatisfactory student performance (Carper, 1965; Conant, 1961, p. E3). As Swanson warned his audience in 1962, “The cost of not providing such programs runs even higher” (*Washington Post*, 1962b, p. C2).

In 1964, the federal government significantly expanded its commitment to educate marginalized children with the Economic Opportunity Act, part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. This program gave children living in poverty a “head start” through a “child development program offering the economically disadvantaged pre-school learning experiences and medical attention” (Belok, 1969, p. 265). Located in cities across America, Head Start enrolled 560,000 children the first summer of its existence (1965) and within a year expanded to 1.3 million children and 2,400 communities (Brazziel, 1967, pp. 344–348). For a nation committed to the idea of achievement through merit, programs such as Head Start increased equality of educational opportunity and served as society’s first line of defense when dealing with children whose very presence represented “a national problem” (Johnson, 1965, p. A10).

In the 1960s, newspaper coverage continued to reveal the nation’s commitment to public schools for answers to unsatisfactory student performance and wider issues of social inequality. During this time, the “slow learner” was framed as “capable of more than he [sic] is now doing” (Dawson, 1961, p. 465), and it became the task of educators to not just identify and contain students who performed below the norm, but to improve their performance before they “sink to the bottom and there remain until they flunk out or drop out of school” (Everitt et al., 1962, p. 8; see also *Boston Globe*, 1966, p. 43). This narrative is captured in the 1966 Coleman Report, which argued schools needed to do more to help students overcome their “non-school disadvantage” such as poverty, community attitudes, and parents’ low education levels (Sugimoto & Carter, 2015, citing Coleman et al., 1966).

School officials were pressed to find novel solutions for unsatisfactory student performance (*Los Angeles Times*, 1964). Segregated, tracked classes were now considered unjust, ineffective, and emotionally damaging, if not cruel; however, placing “slow learners” in “ordinary classrooms” would make them “fumble and fall” (Ilg & Ames 1964, p. 46). The new strategy would be called a “special education,” one that included instruction in the mainstream classroom and one where educators trained in student-specific pedagogy would be tasked with finding the best methods for ensuring underperforming students make progress at the fastest possible rate—so fast that this new system would even

narrow the “achievement gap” with “normal” learners (Carper, 1965, p. B1; Grant, 1965, p. A1; Lane, 1977, p. SE1; Maeroff, 1985; Salzmann, 2005).

The period from 1964 to 1973 saw an unprecedented decline in the U.S. poverty rate (Center for Poverty Research, 2017), with public education contributing to this growth in prosperity and economic advancement for so many individuals. With the *Mills v. Board* ruling of 1972 and the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act (Govinfo.gov, 1975), a free, appropriate public education was now required for all students. Every member of society would have the right to educational opportunity, with public schools serving as the location of treatment for *all* children, typical and atypical, as well as those who had traditionally been excluded from community schools and the public’s gaze. At least that was the hope.

By 1975, the power of this narrative led one columnist to state that “special education therapy is the most reliable treatment for the 10% of American schoolchildren with learning problems” (Andelman, 1975, p. E21). It was the task of school managers to create normalcy out of perceived inequalities (Baxley, 1962, p. 486; Franklin, 1994, p. 29; Furman, 1957, p. 43; Mackenzie, 1946, p. 100; Van Hoosan, 1965; *Washington Post*, 1956b, p. 35), and to that end, millions of state and federal dollars would be spent to help children identified with unsatisfactory performance in school (Miller, 1981).

This increased visibility (and cost) put additional pressure on schools and teachers to produce results, including a hoped-for “cure” for unsatisfactory student performance. But again, and not surprisingly, public schools failed to solve the learning riddle for too many identified students. As the 20th century drew to a close with the hollowing out of the middle class, rising wealth disparity and poverty, outsourcing of jobs, reduced social mobility, and skyrocketing education budgets, policymakers ignored the “elephants in the room”—socioeconomic inequality and structural racism—instead blaming the public school system. This exculpatory move by national leaders was not new; what was radically different was their willingness to jettison community-run schools by creating national legislation supportive of for-profit education corporations.

### **Targeting “Special Needs” and “At-Risk” Youth: Failed Interventions and the Rise of Privatization (c. 1975–Present)**

The Cold War and Sputnik, the civil rights movement and *Brown v. Board*, and Johnson’s War on Poverty served as accelerants for unprecedented federal financial commitment to and oversight of public education during the second half of the 20th century, resulting in decreased segregation and increased socioeconomic opportunity. However, in the closing decades of that century, educational reformers and political leaders from both parties increasingly questioned whether our nation’s system of community-run schools could ever remedy the perennial problems of unsatisfactory student performance and school dropouts. As can be seen in Table 1, this growing concern is reflected in an explosion of articles; *New York Times*’ coverage increased 250% in two decades, from just under 200 articles between 1975 and 1979 compared to just over 500 articles between 1995 and 1999.

Most importantly, this questioning resulted in federal policy that authorized school privatization, culminating in landslide votes in the U.S. House (381 to 41) and Senate (87 to 10) in December of 2001 to support No Child Left Behind, legislation that allowed public monies to flow to private charter schools when public schools failed to make “adequate yearly progress.” Two years later, Congress passed the Opportunity Scholarship Program for the District of Columbia, a voucher program that allowed parents to send their children to secular or religious private schools using federal monies.

How did the United States move from viewing community public schools as the primary solution for unsatisfactory student performance (and socioeconomic and racial discrimination) to seeing these schools as an impediment to that progress? A number of factors contributed to the creation of federal and state legislation receptive to school privatization, including three we highlight here in separate but concurrent histories, that is, (a) rising education costs, especially in special education, (b) racism related to public schools increasingly serving students of color, and (c) a well-funded, orchestrated effort by advocates of privatization to promote the belief that community schools are incapable of improving student achievement.

### Special Education and Rising Public School Costs

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, requiring all public schools receiving federal funding to provide “free appropriate public education” for all children diagnosed with physical or mental “disabilities.” Students identified with “learning disabilities” and all other “handicapping conditions” would be the responsibility of the public school.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, the discourse in the public news media reflected optimism about finding learning solutions for children who possessed “normal or above normal intelligence” but have “one or more physiological defects that may prevent them from learning in traditional ways” (Dullea, 1973). Children who were previously excluded from the “mainstream” classroom were suddenly visible to the “normal” public, and school officials were charged with finding answers for not only “normal” students who underperformed but now also students with “special needs” (Tables 1, 2, and 3).

Changing nomenclature in the 1970s concerning students exhibiting unsatisfactory performance in school caught the public’s attention and heightened concern about how the nation’s community schools would develop programming for these newly labeled students. From the 1970–1974 period to the 1975–1979 period, the number of *New York Times* articles on “special needs” students rose from 24 to 95, a nearly 300% increase (Table 1), while the number of articles on “slow learners” decreased 70% (from 256 to 78).

The new federal law grouped students with “special needs” into 13 categories, with each receiving specific media attention (see Tables 2 and 3). While some labels had a history in public discourse (e.g., “mental retardation,” “deafness,” and “blindness”), other

10 In 1968, the classification of “learning disabled” became a federally designated “handicapping condition” (Fletcher et al., 2007).

terminology was new to the citizenry (e.g., “hearing impairment,” “visual impairment,” “learning disability,” or “developmental delays”). For example, the term “learning disabled” and its derivations appeared in only 19 *New York Times* articles during the 1965–1969 period but jumped to 134 articles during the next half decade. During the 1980s, there was an explosion of articles; the *New York Times* published 1,520 articles involving one or more of the diagnostic terms protected by the 1975 legislation. This spike in news coverage reflected growing public concern about finding (and paying for) learning solutions to a century-old problem that now involved more students and more “causes” for unsatisfactory performance in school.<sup>11</sup> The public was on alert and school officials were responsible for results.

Public school leaders were now tasked with finding learning interventions for many students who had been previously barred from mainstream schooling, many of whom were living in poverty due to generations of discrimination. And, of course, school leaders continued to deal with the perennial problem of unsatisfactory student performance among so many students viewed as otherwise possessing all the qualities necessary for academic success.

For nearly a century, eugenicists and biologists had searched for the cause of unsatisfactory student performance in the body, as physicians (a) checked children’s eyesight (Carper, 1965, p. B1; *Los Angeles Times*, 1960, p. 16; Senate Committee on Education and Labor, 1902; *Washington Post*, 1956a, p. 3); (b) monitored diet (Eldred, 1942, p. 23; Kain, 1949, p. B5; *Washington Post*, 1948a, p. M12; *Washington Post*, 1948b, p. 15; *Wheeling Register*, 1880, p. 3); (c) checked for poison (*Boston Globe*, 1969, p. 59; *New York Times*, 1969, p. 19); and (d) biopsied the thyroid gland (Kain, 1949, p. B5; Mackenzie, 1941, p. SM15; Nelson, 1962, p. 11; Shepherd, 1953, p. 15); however, none of these treatments provided a cure. By the 1970s, many located the cause of unsatisfactory student performance in the brain in the form of “learning disabilities,” a term introduced by Samuel Kirk in 1963 (Fletcher et al., 2007) that explained children exhibiting unsatisfactory performance in school as having “disorders in the development of language, speech, reading, and associated communication skills needed for social interaction” (Kirk, 1963, p. 2).

Public school leaders developed promising programs to help students who were labeled with these “handicapping conditions.” The *New York Times* ran articles with titles that illustrated this commitment, for example, “Special-Needs Classes Bring Hope to Middlesex County’s Handicapped,” “Learning About Children So They Can Learn, Too,” and “Keeping the Multiply Disabled in Regular Classes” (Aiello, 1978; Hagan, 1974; Saul, 1977). However,

11 Note that in the late 1990s and 2000s, the label of “autism” received increased attention in the media, reaching a climax during the 2005–2009 period, with 250 articles. Like the diagnosis for “learning disabled,” a diagnosis of “autism” eluded clear causes and treatments. Like many parents with children identified with “learning disabilities,” many parents with children labeled with “autism” looked to charter schools for “autistic children . . . [who] can’t get special programs, attention in public schools” (Thatcher, 1998, p. 1; *U.S. Newswire*, 2010).

critics of special education, like parenting book author Charles Mangel (1976), warned that when it came to the educational needs of this particular population of students, “science has no sure idea what’s wrong with the learning-disabled child” (p. 439). Furthermore, Mangel warned, “a large number of those who work with children today [are] not competent in the detection of and remedy for learning-disabled boys and girls” (p. 439). Mangel concluded that if there is “no cure for learning disabilities,” then perhaps the best treatment should be sought outside the community school (p. 439; see also Gilmore, 1975).

The doctor’s office would become one outside solution for “learning disabilities”; a diagnosis of “LD” combined with a medical/pharmaceutical treatment would hopefully cure some of the worst learning problems children exhibited in school (Van Buren, 1983, p. OC\_A4; *Washington Post*, 1971, p. B6). For parents concerned about their child’s performance in school, the doctor’s office, not the public school, would be the site of remedy. Parents quickly pursued the “magic pill” or “quick cure,” and the medical establishment was willing to oblige (Andelman, 1975, p. E21). Pediatricians like Dr. Sylvia O. Richardson, associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati School of Medicine, reassured parents, “No significant evidence has been offered to indicate that appropriate medication should *not* be used” (Mangel, 1976, p. 439, italics added). By 1975, 40% of children diagnosed with a “learning disability” were also diagnosed with “hyperactivity” or “short attention spans” (Andelman, 1975, p. E21), and in the closing decade of the century, the media would obsess over “attention deficit,” with 406 *New York Times* articles on “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” (“ADHD” or “ADD”) published during the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

As the 20th century drew to a close, questions remained about the “effectiveness” of special education interventions, especially when judged using standardized measures of academic performance (Samuels, 2019). A 1998 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research entitled, “Does Special Education Raise Academic Achievement for Students with Disabilities?” concluded that “it is not possible to judge whether the program benefits are sufficiently large to justify the added spending involved” (Hanushek et al., 1998). As minority students and students living in poverty became increasingly overrepresented in special education diagnoses (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006) and policymakers continued to ignore the socioeconomic and racial bias embedded in the creation of “unsatisfactory student performance,” failed special education interventions were the easy explanation. With three U.S. Supreme Court rulings (*School Committee of the Town of Burlington v. Department of Ed. of Ma.* [1984]; *Florence Country School District Four v. Carter* [1993]; *Forest Grove School Dist. v. T.A.* [2009]) affirming a parent’s right to reimbursement for private school education if the public school

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12 By the turn of the 21st century, half of all children diagnosed with a “learning disability” were also diagnosed with ADHD (National Institute of Mental Health, 2003), and in many places a diagnosis of “learning disability” was highly correlated with a child’s socioeconomic status and race (Chandler, 2014; Lawson et al., 2017; Simoni, 2018).

was found not to provide an “appropriate” education for a child with special education needs, public tax dollars could now more easily flow to private, for-profit schools.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the issue of effectiveness, concerns were raised about the cost of special education, including the negative impact on educational programming for students without disabilities. A *New York Times* article from 1994 proclaimed, “Special Education Absorbs School Resources,” and reported that “New York City’s special education system has ballooned into a vast educational industry that costs more than 22 cents of every school dollar and employs one quarter of all school employees” (Dillon, 1994, p. A1). During the 1976–1977 school year, 3.69 million American school children (8.3% of the total enrolled population) were protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (NCES, 2017); within five years (1980–1981), that number jumped to 4.14 million school children (10.1% of the total enrolled population), and by the 2000–2001 school year, 4.71 million were served under the special education law (11.4% of total enrollment). A decade before passage of the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, a 1964 *Washington Post* article anticipated the problem of ballooning budgets when reporting on the merits of school regionalization (a form of specialized learning). The author concluded that “special instruction for the unusually bright and unusually slow learners becomes prohibitively expensive” (*Washington Post*, 1964, p. A18).

The escalating number of students identified with “special needs” placed enormous financial pressure on the public, as local taxpayers continued to fund the vast majority of community school operating costs. After the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990, Congress estimated that it would cost states twice as much to educate a student labeled with disabilities as it would nonidentified students (Samuels, 2019). In Massachusetts, for example, the per-pupil expenditure for students enrolled in special education during the 1989–1990 school year was \$6,675 compared to \$4,103 per pupil enrolled in regular education. Expenditure for students enrolled in special education would jump to \$12,416 by 2000–2001, an 86% increase, whereas per-pupil expenditures for students enrolled in regular education rose 51% to \$6,177 (Berman & Urion, 2003). In short, by 2000, a student enrolled in special education services cost twice as much to educate as a student enrolled in regular education; the alarming predictions had come true. (And costs have continued to spiral; in 2020, students identified with disabilities in California cost on average of \$27,000 per pupil, compared to the \$10,000 average cost of nonidentified students, Blad, 2020). Most members of the public viewed educating all children as important, and the public initially supported the cause; however, rising costs along with the growing perception that public schools were ineffective at helping students with special needs fueled calls for market-based solutions.

Despite the questionable effectiveness of special education and enthusiasm for out-of-school pharmacological treatments,

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13 Note that charter schools have been sued in recent years for “systemic failure to provide [special education students] a free appropriate public education” (Harris, 2015, p. A24).

public schools remained the focus of funding to innovate and improve educational opportunity for students with learning disabilities, as well as all others labeled with unsatisfactory performance in school in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, federal monies for public education tripled in just twenty years (i.e., \$14 billion in 1981 to \$42 billion in 2001), with special education expenditures increasing sixfold, from \$1 to \$6 billion over this same period (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). However, despite this substantial increase in federal spending, the majority of special education costs were absorbed by state and local governments (Blad, 2020). By the turn of the century, burgeoning state and federal education budgets, together with rising community costs for public schooling, opened the door for federal legislators to more seriously entertain school privatization as the answer.

### At-Risk Youth and Persistent Racism

While special educators devised new learning interventions and health professionals entertained biopharmacological remedies and medical technologies to treat learning disabilities and other health impairments, there were still legions of other students not eligible for or supported by special education law who were exhibiting unsatisfactory performance in school or dropping out of school altogether.

School dropouts and the plight of “juvenile delinquents” had been a concern for more than a century, with commentators searching for ways of “Keeping Girls [and Boys] in School” (Morgan, 1919). During the 1960s, there was growing acknowledgment that the quality of children’s educational resources significantly impacted their school success. Terms like “culturally impoverished,” “culturally deprived,” “disadvantaged,” and “underprivileged” came to describe children struggling to access privileged educational resources due, primarily, to racial segregation and discrimination (*New York Times*, 1964; Riessman, 1962, 1963, 1965; Smith, 1968). One commentator opined, “Teachers, school administrators, and entire communities must share the blame for the retardation and resulting anti-social behavior of slum children” (F. M. H., 1964).<sup>14</sup>

In 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. New Kent County* that governments had to engage in the “intentional creation of integrated schools,” pushing Northern cities to “redraw attendance boundaries, alter transfer policies, and, most controversially, to institute busing of students” (Stancil, 2018; see also Wilson, 1976). Mothers went to jail fighting de facto segregation still present in Northern schools two decades after the *Brown* decision (Back, 2003), and riots occurred as people resisted court-ordered integration (Stancil, 2018). By the 1970s, in the

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14 F. M. H. (1964) cited Dr. Martin Deutsch, who added that it was “unfair for society to pass the final blame to the teacher” but argued “a combination of lack of money and lack of professional leadership” had led to failure to raise performance among “disadvantaged children.” Deutsch’s solution was the use of “self-teaching devices as teaching machines and television, which are especially successful with disadvantaged children.”

public eye, there was a clear association between a child’s neighborhood school and their access to educational opportunity; however, steps were being taken to address these issues through the nation’s public school system.

Direct federal involvement in desegregation efforts took a step back with Richard Nixon’s appointment of four Supreme Court justices opposed to the ruling in *Green* (Stancil, 2018). The High Court’s subsequent ruling in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) laid the framework for magnet “choice-based” policy (Aggarwal, 2015) that would eventually end direct federal involvement in desegregation efforts. Instead, schools in urban centers would now compete with each other for scarce dollars (Putka, 1989). While many urban White families had access to the suburbs, parents of marginalized children attending “lower-performing” urban schools were left feeling their schools were not as effective (Fisher, 1988b).<sup>15</sup>

In short, the second half of the century initially saw major federal efforts undertaken to integrate public schools; however, these policy interventions ceased during the Nixon administration, and covert forms of segregation continued in the North (e.g., via racism in the real estate and home mortgage markets), impacting trust in the institution of public schooling. One result, by 2018, 46 percent of Black respondents supported the formation of privately managed charter schools compared to 43 percent of White, non-Hispanic respondents (Education Next, 2018).

In 1983, President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education published an alarming report, *A Nation at Risk*, claiming that too many young people were “at risk” of “dropping out of society” (Perlez, 1986).<sup>16</sup> The report warned of major changes in the global economy and the need for public schools to adapt and improve for the benefit and security of the nation (Khadaroo, 2013). Unlike “special needs” discourse that primarily viewed unsatisfactory student performance as a brain-based disability, students at risk of academic failure were viewed as victims of socioeconomic inequalities.

During the 1980s, newspaper media continued to link unsatisfactory student performance to numerous societal factors. In a lengthy 1987 newspaper piece by Barbara Vobejda entitled “Fewer Students May Make the Grade” and retitled on page A22 as “The Class of 2000: Vulnerable Because of Circumstances,” the author pointedly linked environmental factors with student failure:

The generation of students now in kindergarten, more than any before it, is dominated by children whose circumstances—poverty, an unstable home, a non-English-speaking background . . . make them statistically more likely to fail in school. (Vobejda, 1987, pp. A1, A22) In a 1988 article entitled “Obstacles Litter Path to Mainstream,” Marc Fisher argued that demographic isolation associated with poverty and recent

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15 Later research revealed that magnet schools were ineffective in reducing segregation, sometimes exacerbating the problem (Beal & Hendry, 2012).

16 *New York Times* articles that contain the terms “drop out” and “school”: 1950s, 215 articles; 1960s, 779 articles; 1970s, 963 articles; 1980s, 1,052 articles.

immigration fails to provide children with the “economic mix that almost always accompanies high achievement”:

*The D.C. schools are virtually devoid of the economic mix that almost always accompanies high achievement. Almost two-thirds of D.C. schoolchildren qualify for subsidized meals, a standard barometer of poverty. Ninety-two percent of the children are black, most from low-income homes. Most of the others are Hispanic or Asian children of recent immigrants, still struggling economically, still unfamiliar with a new land. (Fisher, 1988a, p. A1)*

In a *New York Times* article from 1988 entitled “The Governors and Poor Children,” Idaho Governor Cicil Adrus linked school failure to welfare and prison:

*We must help children at risk. We either help our children become responsible and self-sufficient, or we will pay, and pay dearly, to provide many of them with welfare or put many of them in jail. (New York Times, 1988, p. A30)*

In 1990, Alan Sugarman, superintendent of Fort Lee, New Jersey, identified additional social factors that “leave a child ‘at risk,’ including divorce, high absenteeism, parents’ education levels, family size, reading ability, retention in early grades, child abuse and serious illness at home” (Hanley, 1990, p. 27).

By the 1990–1994 half decade, the student label of “at risk” appeared in more articles than any of the individual special education identifications or the term “special needs.” “At risk” appeared in over 200 *New York Times* articles for the half decade 2000–2004, 187 in 2005–2009, and 194 in 2010–2014 (see Table 1). Between 1983 and 1990, the alarming language of “at risk” gained traction, and school leaders were given the impossible task of identifying forms of remediation—whether that “risk” was due to socioeconomic inequality, poverty, nutrition, racism, school segregation, a globalized economy, or numerous other environmental variables (Franklin, 1994).

Billions of federal dollars were spent on at-risk programs, many that included formal studies by university researchers to measure program success. The findings were not promising. As reported by the Brookings Institute, a research think tank, after-school programs for at-risk youth that “collected data on a wide range of outcomes including grades, test scores, attendance . . . didn’t affect student outcomes.” By the mid-1990s, after a decade of experimentation with educational programming for at-risk youth, researchers did not identify intervention strategies that significantly and consistently improved students’ school performance (Dynarski, 2015).

For many, the community-run school was still the solution for dealing with these societal factors. However, “at-risk students” were becoming increasingly associated with the schools they attended, and statements linking at-risk behavior to students’ home environment implied that the child’s community, including its school system, needed to be remedied or abandoned. This idea of abandoning the community and its school was reinforced by newspaper headlines published during this time that read, “The People in the Ghetto Aren’t Going to Help” (Quintanilla, 1992) and “Ghetto Families Bloom When Quietly Moved to the Suburbs”

(Fisher, 1988c), and ones saying that schools run by non-local entities “promised a new life” (Fisher, 1988b). In short, what incentive remained to invest public monies in community schools if the problem was lodged in the community itself?

To further complicate the public’s understanding of unsatisfactory student performance and to shift blame back upon students and family lineages, researchers Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argued that “intelligence” (conceptualized narrowly as inherited, fixed, and differentially distributed by race) called into question the use of taxpayer monies for social programming, including public education. Their incendiary 1994 book, *The Bell Curve*, a national bestseller that received extensive media coverage, claimed, “Being poor has a small effect on dropping out of school independent of IQ” (p. 143) and students’ IQ was correlated to race (p. 287). Given their assumption that intelligence was in the genes, unalterable, and the core driver of student learning, along with the fact that poverty is highly correlated with students of color, they concluded it was a fool’s errand to use public monies to intervene on behalf of “low-IQ” students of color and, by implication, special education students with brain-based “disabilities.”

Although a student’s skin color did not necessarily predict “academic failure,” *The Bell Curve*’s narrative suggested that membership in a community of color did. The social “science” research of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) had “demonstrated” that “school failure” was an intractable social problem, with students of color framed as perpetually “at risk” (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). As media attention on this specter of “failure” focused increasingly on students labeled “special needs” and “at-risk” (Tables 1, 2, and 3), school privatizers targeted minority communities as the beachhead for establishing for-profit charter schools, with cash-strapped urban leaders quite receptive to the message that private sector outsourcing and market competition would reduce school budgets.

Instead of finally acknowledging the “elephants in the room” (i.e., structural racism and poverty and their many ancillary effects), conservatives and neoliberals alike pushed measures that opened the door to privatized schooling. For example, the 1996 Welfare Reform Act enabled for-profit companies to access federal child-welfare monies to create “special-education programs, psychiatric-treatment centers, orphanages, and juvenile prisons.” However, these programs were quickly deemed ineffective; one review of the research concluded, “Not only can privatization lead to abuses but it doesn’t even necessarily save money” (Press & Washburn, 2002). These for-profit interventions in the 1990s are now referenced pejoratively as “the at-risk youth industry” (Press & Washburn, 2002). In short, during the 1990s, public school programs failed to create effective learning environments for children “at risk,” and the newly privatized efforts fared no better, often worse.

As the 20th century closed, cracks in public school support were evident; the American public was understandably frustrated with burgeoning school budgets and a system that had repeatedly failed to find a solution to unsatisfactory student performance. Privatizers were now afforded much greater voice given steeply rising costs in public education, children of color populating

schools in much higher numbers, media narratives of intractable brain-based learning disabilities among special needs students, *Bell Curve* claims of IQ limitations among “at-risk youth,” and the nation’s unwillingness to address poverty and its many negative effects on learning. Privatizers called for school improvement through federal legislation that allowed the competitive marketplace to do what it purports to do best: cut costs and improve services. It was nothing less than a new version of “separate but equal” with multiple justifications.

### **Selling Free Market Capitalism and Legislating For-Profit Schooling**

As we’ve shown, 20th-century media coverage of unsatisfactory student performance reveals that government officials remained committed to public schools for remedies and that school officials tried unsuccessfully, again and again, to find solutions that worked. While newspaper coverage didn’t “explain” the nation’s persistent commitment to public school, it no doubt helped. The reversal of this support beginning in the 1990s and growing interest in school privatization cannot be understood without also reviewing the ideological history and aggressive advocacy of school privatization in the United States. In other words, the push to privatize schools in America would not have occurred without a privatization ideology, one that required decades of public advocacy before it gained policy legs.

These efforts at public persuasion benefitted from the fact that privately operated schools had always offered remarkable treatments and outcomes for concerned parents (*New York Times*, 1947, p. SM62; *New York Times*, 1950b, p. 16). For example, during the “slow learner” post-WWII period, Ruth Lipps Sunny Crest School in Los Angeles offered a year-round school with “therapeutic training” adjusted for the “slow learner” (*Los Angeles Times*, 1948, p. C7), while the Kolburne School in Norwalk, Connecticut, offered “concentration development,” “companionship,” and “social and behavior adjustments” in their program, which “specialize[d] in the education and training of slow children” (*New York Times*, 1950a, p. SM27). Despite these novel interventions, advocacy for these private schools were mostly limited to the classified section of the newspaper.

The writings of economist Milton Friedman in the 1950s provided rationales for “improving” America (including its schools) by reducing the size of government and letting the competitive marketplace ‘naturally’ create new forms of social organization (Friedman, 1955, 1962). Friedman’s radical school policy proposal (i.e., vouchers) looked to jettison the institution of public schooling, a system that was helping the U.S. become a global superpower and one that had been called upon for decades to address so many of the nation’s local, state and national problems (Johnson & Salle, 2004; Kliebard, 1987; Ravitch, 2001). Friedman’s work, published one year after the initial *Brown v. Board* decision and the same year as the second *Brown* decision, gave Americans eager to flee the High Court’s desegregation ruling a justification for their White flight.

Within a decade of the Court’s rulings and Friedman’s publication, several Southern states implemented Freedom of

Choice Plans. These policies were disguised to promote desegregation through “school choice” for both Black and White children; however, in reality, they served as a mechanism to fund White flight to publicly funded, all-White schools, both public and private, while in some cases completely eliminating access to schooling for Black children (Aggarwal, 2015; Ford, Johnson, & Partelow, 2017). Deprived of de jure segregation as a mechanism for stratifying society, White supremacists at the state and local levels in both the North and the South would maneuver to reinforce their system of apartheid schooling through privatization plans that would cement de facto segregation throughout the country (Rooks, 2017). For example, Choctaw County, Alabama, saw private school enrollment jump from 25,000 students to 535,000 between 1966 and 1972 (Aggarwal, 2015). Friedman’s limited government ideology provided ammunition for Americans eager to resist Court rulings, civil rights legislation, Johnson’s War on Poverty, and other education initiatives that expanded federal funding, influence, and impact on local school districts starting in the 1960s (Hechinger, 1985; Krugman, 2014; Mayer & Jencks, 1995; Wilkins, 1974). This mixed narrative of libertarian values combined with a desire to maintain a caste hierarchy through segregated schooling undergirds today’s privatization movement (Kozol, 2005; Rooks, 2017; Wilkerson, 2020).

Shortly after Friedman’s free market school proposal, Powell, Jr. (1971) wrote a call-to-arms memorandum to corporate America that supplemented Friedman’s secular faith in “spontaneous order” (Norman, 1982) and free market social organization. Just months before his U.S. Supreme Court appointment, Powell argued that the nation’s universities and secondary schools were swaying public opinion against capitalism and toward greater government regulation and socialist ideas (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Not coincidentally, just two years later (1973), the Heritage Foundation and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) were created to promote free market, pro-business principles and policies.

School privatizers began to employ a comprehensive strategy to market their agenda to the American people and frame public schooling as an obstacle to raising student performance (Goldstein, 2010; Spreen & Stark, 2014). The public was promised that if schools ran “somewhat like a business,” they would see better results (Bulkeley, 1978, p. 1; James, 1971, p. 1), rather than ballooning budgets and “broken promises” (*New York Times*, 1981, p. A22). Public schools became the battle ground in a “culture war” over the nation’s future (Foster & Davis, 2004; Vischer, 2002) and private schooling offered uncontested ‘high ground’ in that struggle. While there were just four conservative think tanks working on education policy prior to 1970 (McDonald, 2013, p. 4), by the early 2000s, there were 132 organizations that included think tanks, advocacy organizations, parents’ organizations, and education scholarship organizations that promoted school choice via vouchers or education tax credits (Cohen, 2007). Public schools were under direct attack.

Once Reagan was in office, his administration worked to enact federal tax credits for private and parochial school tuition payments, cut federal assistance for social programs that spurred

social mobility, loosen federal oversight of enacted civil rights legislation, and divert funds away from “states serving large numbers of poor, nonwhite children” and “toward more sparsely settled states with few minority children” (Fiske, 1983, p. A1; see also Fiske, 1982, p. F5E1). Reagan allied himself with Milton Friedman and other free market economic conservatives who aimed to dismantle community-owned and community-operated public schools (now disparagingly referred to as “government schools” or “socialist schools”), along with the Christian Right that aimed to introduce publicly funded religious education (Haber- man, 2005; Moen, 1990).

More broadly, Reagan’s policy positions rekindled and reflected longstanding beliefs in American exceptionalism, an ideology committed to small, laissez-faire government, the superiority of free market social organization through “spontaneous order” (Barry, 1982), a Christian worldview, and rugged bootstrap individualism (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2004). Reagan also pushed a narrative of government incompetence as justification for the defunding of public institutions, and because public schools did not solve unsatisfactory student performance, they were also on the chopping block (Apple, 2001; Heertum & Torres, 2011). Somehow this narrative gained strength despite an increase in segregated schools and widening inequality (Orfield & Yun, 1999). Privatization policies contradicted the underlying values and commitments of civil rights legislation that worked to improve public education by correcting prior inequities, better ensuring opportunities for all students, regardless of their biologic or social backgrounds.

By the 1990s, the discourse of school privatization as a solution for unsatisfactory student performance had gained enough strength that its premises were adopted by both conservatives and neoliberals (Clinton, 2000). Building on the work of “education president” George H. W. Bush, whose America 2000 legislation provided a framework for greater public school accountability and, most importantly, endorsement of charter schools (Strauss, 2018, citing Schneider, 2017), a Republican-controlled Congress with support from President Bill Clinton passed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the Improving America’s Schools Act in 1994. Federal appropriations for charter schools quickly rose from \$6 million in FY 1995 to \$145 million by FY 2000 (Vergari, 2002), and the federal funds from the 1994 Goals 2000 legislation were used to create 14 charter schools in Massachusetts alone (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The Clinton administration’s support for privatization echoed rhetorical talking points set by Milton Friedman, contributing to the growth of the charter school industry from one school in 1992 to over 2,000 schools by 2001 (NAPCS, 2019).<sup>17</sup>

This legislation dovetailed with three Supreme Court rulings that eroded judicial oversight of desegregation in America’s schools. *Board of Ed. of Oklahoma City v. Dowell* (1991), *Freeman v. Pitts* (1992), and *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995) collectively sent a

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17 Bill Clinton’s support for charter schools earned him the first ever lifetime achievement award from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS, 2019).

message that the courts had done enough when it came to school desegregation, releasing a large number of school districts from their court-ordered desegregation plans. This resulted in a substantial demographic shift toward resegregation in “non-southern districts,” as Black students exited these schools (Lutz, 2011, p. 134). After 1991, the percentage of children attending integrated schools would drop precipitously, going from 43.5% of Black students attending majority White schools in 1988 to half that (23.2%) by 2011 (Orfield et al., 2014). In the Twin Cities, the number of segregated schools (defined as more than 90% non-White) jumped from 11 schools in 2000 to 83 in 2009 (Orfield & Stancil, 2017).

The removal of court oversight was nothing more than tinker compared to the most effective accelerant for privatization: the bipartisan passage of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. NCLB called upon high-stakes, standardized testing, an instrument rooted in racially-biased early 20th century IQ testing (Au, 2015), to assess student progress and judge the effectiveness of public school programs. By 2000, every U.S. state but Iowa had implemented standardized testing to some degree for grades K–5, shining a gaze on school “effectiveness.” However, NCLB went a step further in guaranteeing erosion of support for public schooling, as over the next decade this far-reaching federal law put a spotlight on the yearly “performance” of every public school’s “lowest achievers” and labeled a school’s annual “progress” as “adequate” or “not adequate” based on the test performance of these students (Saltman, 2007; Spreen & Stark, 2014). Given a century of persistent unsatisfactory achievement by a significant percentage of America’s children, it was ludicrous for NCLB legislators to demand that all students in public schools achieve “academic proficiency” in mathematics and language arts by the year 2014.

But demand they did; soon a vast majority of the nation’s communities were told their children were attending “failing schools,” with 48% of public schools not making the “Adequate Yearly Progress” benchmark set for the 2010–2011 school year (Usher, 2012)—a vast majority of them being schools with high minority enrollments (Spreen & Stark, 2015, citing Lipman, 2011, and Saltman, 2007). More insidious, Susan Neuman, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education under the Bush administration, acknowledged that some colleagues involved in the design of NCLB saw it as a way to undermine public education, to “blow it up a bit . . . There were a number of people pushing hard for market forces and privatization” (Wallis, 2008). Indeed, NCLB served the charter industry, as within a decade the number of charter schools more than doubled from roughly 2,000 in 2001 to 5,200 schools by the 2010–2011 school year (NCES, 2019b).

Ignoring the destructive impact of NCLB on the reputation of the nation’s public schools, the Obama administration continued Bush-era school privatization policies as an answer for improving America’s academic performance (Onosko, 2011). In 2009, Obama’s \$4.3 billion Race to the Top competitive grants program increased funding for the Federal Charter School Program by 38% compared to the Bush administration’s final budget the prior year

(Tiede, 2016). And in 2015, when Congress reasserted its oversight of education by passing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the new legislation maintained similar levels of funding for the Federal Charter Schools Program first established in 1994 (U.S. Department of 2019a). In short, during the eight-year Obama presidency, the percentage of American students attending charter schools doubled, from 3% in 2009 to 6% in 2016 (Strauss, 2016), while the total number of charter schools more than tripled between 2000 and 2016, that is, from 1,993 to 7,011 schools (NCES, 2019a).

Expansion of support for charter schools was promoted by a media campaign that framed the public school as an impediment to raising student performance and framed privatized education reform efforts by nontraditionally trained outsiders as the only means for making gains (Sugimoto & Carter, 2015). In 2009, in his first speech on education, Obama communicated a narrative of “ineffective” public education, bemoaning the slipping of grades, crumbling of schools, and poor quality of teachers (Christakis, 2017), while movies such as *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and programs such as Teach for America (Schneider, 2011), funded by a billionaire class eager to assert their power on the American education system (Ravitch, 2020a, 2020b), fueled a perception that public schools and unionized teachers were the problem (Sugimoto & Carter, 2015, citing Cann, 2013). Together with competing pressures to revitalize the curriculum and scale down the impersonal nature of “large schools,” regionalized public schools designed to provide more educational resources to students and serve as a mechanism for desegregation were made to look like dinosaurs in a rapidly changing world (Schneider, 2011).

As revealed in the education policies of the Bush and Obama presidencies (2001 through 2016), the privatization philosophy of Milton Friedman had reached the highest seat of power in American politics, regardless of party. With the Trump administration’s first three annual budget proposals drastically increasing federal support for charter schools, vouchers, and private school scholarship tax credits (Khatami, 2019), with continued support coming from within the states (Rafa et al., 2020), approval from the Supreme Court (Totenberg & Naylor, 2020), and millions of dollars pouring in from the pockets of America’s billionaire class (Ravitch, 2020a), the privatization of American education continues to grow. Regardless of who is “succeeding” in school (public or private), who is “underperforming,” and what is being done about it, 21st-century policymakers on the Right want to replace community-owned and community-run public schools with privately run for-profit enterprises (Smarick, 2008), and neoliberal Democrats cannot escape criticism for their own contributions in undermining an institution they purportedly support and whose unionized teachers they covet politically.

The multidecade marketing campaign to privatize American schooling finally produced the desired cognitive dissonance; less than one-third of parents now say they’d pick a public school over a private school if cost and location were not factors, and yet, the public’s approval of their local community school is at a forty-year high (Richardson, 2017)!

## Conclusion

American public schools have always struggled to create a structure and a curriculum that works for all children and that can successfully achieve so many important, often competing educational goals, including addressing children’s interests and needs, meeting workforce demands of the economy, giving young people the opportunity to learn about so many broad and diverse fields of human understanding represented in the academic disciplines, and using schools as a vehicle to create a “better” society (Kliebard, 1987). Unfortunately, this profoundly difficult but essential community work is now being outsourced, striking at the heart of democratic education (Gutmann, 1987) and including a reduction in public input, ownership and oversight, transparent decision-making, and equality of educational opportunity.

In 2016, the NAACP, the nation’s oldest civil rights organization, called for a moratorium on new charter schools by sounding an alarm over their improper accountability measures (Strauss, 2016). NAACP leadership emphasized other negative effects when urban communities pass the education “baton” to the private sector, including rising inequality in educational opportunity and outcomes, both within cities and across the nation (Gruenberg, 2018). For example, a recent study by the National Center for Educational Statistics revealed that a majority of charter schools (56%) enroll student populations that are either disproportionately poor or disproportionately rich (Musu, 2018). Additionally, inequalities in funding between White and non-White school districts persists (Burnette, II, 2019), with for-profit charters presented as the solution when, in fact, a fairer distribution of educational resources is needed.

Between 1995 and 2017, the percentage of school children attending racially diverse schools increased nationwide from 28% to 45%; however, the vast majority of large urban centers—where privatization has gained greatest traction—remain deeply segregated (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). According to the Associated Press, “as of school year 2014–2015, more than 1,000 of the nation’s 6,747 charter schools had minority enrollment of at least 99 percent, and the number has been rising steadily” (Moreno, 2017). A more recent analysis found that 70% of students enrolled in voucher programs were attending “severely segregated schools,” with 58% of students enrolled in all-minority schools (Civil Rights Project, 2018). Urban schools today are less likely to reflect the racial diversity of their neighborhood demographics than suburban districts (Marcotte & Dalane, 2019, citing Bischoff & Tach, 2018), with charter school policies linked to this increase in segregation (Bifulco et al., 2009; Ladd et al., 2017; Marcotte & Dalane, 2019; Orfield & Stancil, 2017).

Due to strong economic incentives coming from those wishing to profit from and maintain the status quo of segregated housing and schooling (Orfield & Stancil, 2017) and the persistence of racism among parents who can choose where their children attend school (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Marcotte & Dalane, 2019; Reardon & Yun, 2002; Saporito & Hanley, 2014; Samuels, 2020), these studies present an educational landscape that contradicts the

principles of the common school movement and reveal a profusion of discriminatory practices and/or blatant racism. In short, it seems the invisible hand of “free” and “natural” market forces needs human guidance (i.e., policies) to ensure racial integration and greater equality of educational opportunity in our communities (Fahle & Reardon, 2018).

In addition to reversing decades of desegregation efforts, school privatization has disenfranchised urban communities that desire sovereignty over the education of their children. It’s no coincidence that American cities with some of the highest percentages of people of color also have the highest percentages of children attending charter schools where local parents have no control over school governance (Prothero, 2015). Parents and vested community members continue to struggle for control of their children’s education as states pass legislation that invites and/or requires the turnover of school authority to private interests (Isensee, 2019).

Public schools do have flaws (Ravitch, 2001); however, they “perform” no worse (and frequently better) than voucher programs (Carey, 2017) and charter schools (Lopez, 2014) when socioeconomic variable are controlled—and they do not deny services to special needs students (Harris, 2015, p. A24). One must question this new privatization policy direction, as it will do nothing to reduce inequalities in educational opportunity. Worse, maybe the nation has abandoned its founding democratic ideals of community-owned and community-run schooling, including equality of opportunity and individual success based on merit. A move away from public education is to move away from these ideals, especially when privatized schooling is used as an outsourcing depot for America’s poor and children of color (Jeffries, 2017; Payson-Denney, 2017).

After more than a century of unsuccessful efforts to identify remedies for unsatisfactory student performance and allay the social anxieties they trigger for the nation, the two most important causes sit like elephants in the educational policy board room: poverty and structural racism (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Morrissey & Vinopal, 2018). Instead of dealing with structural inequality and inadequate school funding, society’s gaze has focused on subjugating marginalized children, promoting private interests, and attacking unionized teachers working on the front lines to promote student achievement (Hill et al., 2006; Toppo, 2017; Winston, 2016). Until policymakers address growing inequality in society (da Costa, 2017; Semuels, 2016), no structural change in school organization will succeed, regardless of the labels we assign to children who “underperform” in school or to whom communities outsource their duty to educate all children.

At their best, the nation’s community-owned and community-operated schools have tried to help “backward children,” “slow learners,” “students with special needs,” and “at-risk youth” cultivate their given abilities and talents and escape the confines of poverty and structural racism along with other social, economic, and family impediments. At their best, public schools have served as the foundational institution sustaining the nation’s vision of a democratic meritocracy. If we want to “make America great again,” policymakers must address issues of poverty, economic inequality, persistent racism, and inadequate funding for integrated public schools rather than blame community “government schools” for unsatisfactory student performance. Most importantly, they must stop pretending that a magical cure can be found in the marketplace of corporatized private schools.

## Appendix A

### Selected Terms Used in a Search of ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* with Index (January 1, 1900–December 31, 2017)

“at risk”	“at risk youth*” or “at risk student*” or “at risk learner*” or “at risk child*” or “youth at risk” or “student at risk” or “students at risk” or “learner at risk” or “learners at risk” or “child at risk” or “children at risk”
“autism”	“autistic youth*” or “autistic student*” or “autistic learner*” or “autistic child*” or “youth with autism” or “student with autism” or “students with autism” or “child with autism” or “children with autism” or “learner with autism” or “learners with autism”
“backward”	“backward youth*” or “backward student*” or “backward learner*” or “backward child*”
“blindness”	“blind youth*” or “blind student*” or “blind learner*” or “blind child*” or “youth with blindness” or “student with blindness” or “students with blindness” or “child with blindness” or “children with blindness” or “learner with blindness” or “learners with blindness”
“brain injury”	“brain injured youth*” or “brain injured student*” or “brain injured learner*” or “brain injured child*” or “youth with brain injuries” or “student with a brain injury” or “students with brain injuries” or “child with a brain injury” or “children with brain injuries” or “learner with a brain injury” or “learners with brain injuries”
“deafness”	“deaf youth*” or “deaf student*” or “deaf learner*” or “deaf child*” or “youth with deafness” or “student with deafness” or “students with deafness” or “child with deafness” or “children with deafness” or “learner with deafness” or “learners with deafness”
“developmental delays”	“developmentally delayed youth*” or “developmentally delayed student*” or “developmentally delayed learner*” or “developmentally delayed child*” or “youth with developmental delays” or “student with a developmental delay” or “students with developmental delays” or “child with a developmental delay” or “children with developmental delay” or “learner with a developmental delay” or “learners with developmental delay”
“emotional disturbance”	“emotionally disturbed youth*” or “emotionally disturbed student*” or “emotionally disturbed learner*” or “emotionally disturbed child*” or “youth with emotional disturbance” or “student with emotional disturbance” or “students with emotional disturbance” or “child with emotional disturbance” or “children with emotional disturbance” or “learner with emotional disturbance” or “learners with emotional disturbance”
“health impairment”	“health impaired youth*” or “health impaired student*” or “health impaired learner*” or “health impaired child*” or “youth with health impairments” or “student with a health impairment” or “students with health impairments” or “child with a health impairment” or “children with health impairments” or “learner with a health impairment” or “learners with health impairments”
“hearing impairment”	“hearing impaired youth*” or “hearing impaired student*” or “hearing impaired learner*” or “hearing impaired child*” or “youth with hearing impairments” or “student with a hearing impairment” or “students with hearing impairments” or “child with a hearing impairment” or “children with hearing impairments” or “learner with a hearing impairment” or “learners with a hearing impairments”
“language impairment”	“language impaired youth*” or “language impaired student*” or “language impaired learner*” or “language impaired child*” or “youth with language impairments” or “student with a language impairment” or “students with language impairments” or “child with a language impairment” or “children with language impairments” or “learner with a language impairment” or “learners with language impairments”
“learning disabled”	“learning disabled youth*” or “learning disabled student*” or “learning disabled learner*” or “learning disabled child*” or “youth with learning disabilities” or “student with a learning disability” or “students with learning disabilities” or “child with a learning disability” or “children with learning disabilities”
“mental retardation”	“mentally retarded youth*” or “mentally retarded student*” or “mentally retarded learner*” or “mentally retarded child*” or “youth with mental retardation” or “student with mental retardation” or “students with mental retardation” or “child with mental retardation” or “children with mental retardation” or “learner with mental retardation” or “learners with mental retardation”
“slow”	“slow youth*” or “slow student*” or “slow learner*” or “slow child*”
“special needs”	“special needs youth*” or “special needs student*” or “special needs learner*” or “special needs child*” or “youth with special needs” or “student with special needs” or “students with special needs” or “child with special needs” or “children with special needs” or “learner with special needs” or “learners with special needs”
“speech impairment”	“speech impaired youth*” or “speech impaired student*” or “speech impaired learner*” or “speech impaired child*” or “youth with speech impairments” or “student with a speech impairment” or “students with speech impairments” or “child with a speech impairment” or “children with speech impairments” or “learner with a speech impairment” or “learners with speech impairments”
“visual impairment”	“visually impaired youth*” or “visually impaired student*” or “visually impaired learner*” or “visually impaired child*” or “youth with visual impairments” or “student with a visual impairment” or “students with visual impairments” or “child with a visual impairment” or “children with visual impairments” or “learner with a visual impairment” or “learners with visual impairments”

\* The asterisks in the search term allows for continuation of terms (e.g., “student\*” = “student” or “students”).

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