

INTRODUCTION

Publicly Blaming: The Rhetoric of Education Reform

On October 17, 1979, President Jimmy Carter called members of both houses of Congress to the White House for the ceremonial signing of new legislation organizing a United States Department of Education (ED).¹ Along with several reporters and a class of fourth graders, the congressional delegation gathered in the East Room to bear witness as the president made history. For over a century, education had been a bureaucratic rolling stone. Although the small federal bureaucracy devoted to schooling was originally formed as a department by President Andrew Johnson in 1867, it was demoted to the status of office just two years later. As such, the US Office of Education bounced around the executive branch with no direct representative in the president's cabinet. For more than a century, as public schools proliferated across the country, their governance remained almost entirely the responsibility of state and local governments. Finally, in 1953, the Office of Education landed in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, wherefrom the assembled were to witness Carter liberate it.

Before putting pen to paper, the president addressed his East Room audience, explaining his reasons for restoring education to the status of

department. According to Carter, public education in the United States suffered from a lack of coherent federal leadership. “The Federal Government,” he lectured, has “confused its role of junior partner in American education with that of silent partner.”² Comparing his experience lobbying for education reform as a Georgia state senator with his experience as president, Carter lamented: “When I became President, that situation was dramatically different. There has not been in the Federal Government an adequate mechanism by which we can improve the quality of education in the United States.”³ Having made his point, Carter turned his attention to corralling the unruly fourth graders and legislators for a photograph. Then, with everyone on their marks, he signed the bill.

With the department founded, Carter began speaking formally on behalf of the nation’s newest and smallest cabinet-level agency. According to Carter, the most essential function of the ED would be to foster and direct the national deliberation over the purpose and shape of public schooling. “I came to the office of the Presidency determined,” Carter said, “that our Nation’s formidable educational challenges should be brought to the forefront of national discussion, where they belong.”⁴ Parsing the administrative purview of the new department from the role of the existing state-level departments, Carter explained that, unlike the state departments of education or the preceding federal office, the ED would create a “cabinet-level leader in education” to “stir national discussion of critical education concerns” and “increase the Nation’s attention to education.” Moreover, “as a result of placing education in a highly visible department of its own,” Carter argued that the American people would gain “a much clearer perspective on what the Federal Government is doing in education.” Carter characterized this more detailed perspective as a way to improve education policy making through democratization: “It allows people to better decide what the Government should and should not be doing in education.”⁵

More than thirty years on, it is safe to say that Carter got his wish. There has been a vibrant and consequential deliberation over education

policy centered on the role of the federal government in improving America's schools.⁶ Not only has this conversation drawn participation from a multitude of perspectives and interests, it has resulted in dramatic policy changes. Whether they call it an "era," a "syndrome," or a "paradigm," scholars of education policy and history recognize the rise of accountability-based reforms as public education's defining development since the founding of the ED.⁷ As they have worked to connect the dots between the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and the passage of No Child Left Behind, these scholars have written detailed accounts of the political transformation that precipitated a new kind of education policy during the closing decades of the twentieth century. But despite an abundance of scholarship analyzing the rise of accountability as a historical development or policy program, there is no sustained account of the persuasive tactics that facilitated such dramatic change.

This book looks closely at the visions that have competed for control of America's public school system since the founding of the ED in an effort to assess the national deliberation Carter solicited in the twilight of his presidency. Since 1980, public education in the United States has enjoyed a great deal of national attention, but on close examination much of that attention proves negative. For better and for worse, the failures of the public school system have been the fulcrum of the national deliberation Carter inaugurated along with the ED. Many Americans describe their public school system as failing, and so do the people they look to for leadership.⁸ Regardless of its politics, nearly every organized effort to change education policy from the 1980s forward has agreed on the poor state of the public school system, each offering its own explanation for why. Voucher advocates have argued that public schools fail because they are monopolies. Social justice advocates have argued that public schools fail because they are segregated or otherwise unequal. The standards movement has argued that public schools fail because they have low expectations. The list goes on, but the rhetorical formula remains the same. Arguments for reform in the era

of achievement begin by addressing the nagging question: Who or what is to blame for the unacceptable state of America's public schools?⁹

The consensus that America's schools are failing has made the public schools a rhetorical hot potato. By blaming, reformers put the burning roots of educational failure in someone else's hands. Blame gives reformers a tool that identifies a cause for educational failure to fit their preferred solution while simultaneously impugning rival interests. In this discursive landscape, blame is the high ground and the result has been the proliferation of blaming. Public education's blameworthy have included teachers, students, parents, administrators, and entire governments. Not even inanimate concepts like segregation, genetics, race, class, and progressivism have escaped the allegation of culpability. This profusion of blaming presents an opportunity to catalogue and compare blame's forms and their consequences as well as an opportunity to understand the patterns of public argument that have driven the contemporary politics of education. First, however, a word on the scholarly study of the history and politics of education.

A RHETORICAL HISTORY OF EDUCATION REFORM

In 1959, still twenty years before Carter founded his new department and foretold its deliberative future, a group of prominent historians gathered in Williamsburg, Virginia, for a meeting of the Institute of Early American History and Culture. Addressing "needs and opportunities for study," they discussed new approaches to the history of American education. Bernard Bailyn, a Harvard history professor, gave the keynote in which he argued for historical work that would appropriately situate North American educational practices in the context of their European forbears. Bailyn expressed special concern that the role of education in America's broader social history had been overlooked, to the detriment of both social and educational history. "Education," he observed, "not only reflects and adjusts to society; once formed, it turns back upon it and acts upon it. The con-

sequences of this central transformation of education have significantly shaped the development of American society.”¹⁰ Although Bailyn made his remarks to encourage the study of educational practices in colonial America and during the early republic, his description of the give-and-take between American society and American education is at the heart of this project and a great deal of contemporary work on the history, policy, and sociology of education in the United States.

Now, after more than a century of near constant reform, academics who study education policy and history in the United States have begun an ambitious effort to approach their subject anew. Since the turn of the millennium, they have increasingly addressed the need for new perspectives on the meaning of public education in the United States. In particular, scholars have tried with mounting urgency to make sense of education policy’s seemingly infinite appetite for reforms. In their efforts to do this, some scholars have declared reform the natural and rightful state of public education, whereas others have argued that reform is the chief influence ruining it. Some scholars have surveyed the history of reform and concluded that it is a broken record predictably revolving the same inadequate solutions, and still others have found distinct eras of reform forever layering policies and bureaucracies atop each other.¹¹ Implicitly, all of these scholars acknowledge reform as the unnamed mechanism in Bailyn’s keynote, the social process through which American society acts upon education and education turns back upon it.

Through the politics of school reform, the United States and the public schools negotiate and renegotiate their indivisible future. Like all domains of public policy, education policy is created and enforced through the meaning-making power of language and argument.¹² When advocates and policy makers seek reforms, they turn to rhetoric to shape the public’s perceptions and make a persuasive case for change. Rhetoric, which Aristotle defined as the “ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion,” provides an intellectual tradition as well as a body

of theory for analyzing the ethics and tactics of advocacy.¹³ Indeed, many scholars have used rhetoric to analyze the public discussion of education policy and history.¹⁴

Applying the theoretical tools from rhetoric's scholarly tradition to the question of how best to understand an educational system stuck in perpetual reform, this book addresses the role of blame as the predominant persuasive resource of educational policy advocates. Blame anchors appeals for change, facilitating "reforming again, again, and again," by providing a narrative through which the expectations and outcomes of public education can be contested.¹⁵ Far from a taboo or deviant persuasive technique, blame constitutes the core of education policy discourse. It accommodates a broad range of policy positions, and its persistent utility and ubiquity speak volumes. Indeed, blame is the central rationale of federal education policy as we know it.¹⁶ Accountability, the idea that the successes and—much more importantly—failures of the nation's public schools can be placed squarely and without qualification on the shoulders of local educational professionals, is blame enthroned as policy. As a rhetorical strategy, blame also gives accountability the urgency of "an onrushing freight train," and its capacity to confer such urgency is part of why it has been such a popular appeal in the pursuit of reform.¹⁷

To account for the central role of blame in the discourse of education policy, I examine five of the most prominent cases of public persuasion over education policy since the founding of the ED, not only in terms of their intricacies as public acts, but also as strategic manipulations of their varying institutional contexts. This means shifting the frame of education policy scholarship from a point of view that prioritizes the parsing of successful and failed reform efforts to a broader concern with the shape and influence of those efforts that made the most substantial bids to write and rewrite the blame narrative that is the center of education policy making. Toward those ends, this book concerns education policy as an always-evolving national conversation instead of as a series of legislative decisions or the expression of structural forces. To wit, what follows is not a political or social

history of education, but a “rhetorical history,” an account of a few decades in the process of the mutual transformation Bailyn described.¹⁸

A BRIEF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC LIFE OF BLAME

A common complaint among educators, and fairly so, is that everyone believes him or herself an expert on the subject of education. It takes thirteen years of formal schooling just to earn a high school diploma. Americans commonly spend more than a decade and a half as students before leaving school behind and entering the workforce. As a result, it is not terribly surprising that many Americans feel they know a thing or two about education by the time they are finished with school, even if they had no formal training in education as a subject. Blame is similar. The Western intellectual tradition has been investigating the nature of blame in systematic philosophical treatises since ancient Athens. Humanity has had Aristotle’s thoughts on blame for almost half a millennium longer than it has had Jesus’s. Although only a small group of people are familiar with the breadth of the resulting tradition of philosophical and rhetorical inquiry, practically everyone on Earth has been coping with blame on a daily basis since birth. If experience is the best teacher, then all of humanity holds advanced degrees in both blame and education. But despite our ease and familiarity with blame, careful analysis reveals blaming as an intricate rhetorical act. As a result, blame has already received enough careful analysis to provide some initial trajectories for investigating its public life.

Two secular, intellectual traditions—philosophy and rhetoric—have theorized blame. In the middle of the twentieth century, blame came to play an integral role in one of the leading debates in philosophy. On one side, philosophers argued in favor of the existence of free will, whereas on the other side, philosophers argued—or at least feared—that free will is a particularly cruel illusion in a universe that is actually deterministic. In an essay that continues to be an early touchstone in that debate, British

philosopher P. F. Strawson argued that blame can exist only in a world with free will. This, he posed, is because you must attribute to the person you are blaming the ability to have acted otherwise. If that person could not have acted otherwise—that is, the person’s actions were predetermined by a universe that accords each person an inescapable future—then circumstance is responsible instead of the accused. Strawson thus postulated that blaming is not just an attribution of fault, but also a complementary attribution of agency.¹⁹ For example, Strawson’s observation is inherited in David Tyack and Larry Cuban’s often-cited observation: “Schools can easily shift from panacea to scapegoat.”²⁰ Common to both roles is the power to make a difference: the attribution of agency.

By comparison, rhetoricians have been theorizing blame as strategic communication since the middle of the fourth century BCE. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle identified blame, *psogos*, as the opposite of praise, *epainos*. Together, praise and blame were the two halves of ceremonial, or *epideictic*, speaking. Epideictic oratory typically occurs during a ceremony like a wedding, graduation, or inauguration, and according to Aristotle, it celebrates a socially held value.²¹ As strategic communication, epideictic rhetoric can be used to praise someone for upholding a value or to blame that same someone for violating it. Aristotle’s rhetorical conception of blame is useful because it frees blame (along with praise) from the logical rigidity of the philosophical perspective on blame in favor of its *telos*, or ends. In this way, a rhetorical perspective privileges blame’s use value as a social practice. For Aristotle, to blame is to speak negatively about another, regardless of whether any discrete fault is proven. There is an “I know it when I see it” element to Aristotle’s description of blame, which is important to capture with a concept that everyone knows so intimately. Like Aristotle, we know disparaging speech when we encounter it, and this broad view of blame helps consolidate the past three and a half decades of education reform rhetoric. This big-tent conception of blame also connects the rhetoric of education with larger trends in political speech.

Aside from freeing blame of purely analytic moorings, understanding blame as strategic communication also aids in the analysis of blame as a public act. Kenneth Burke, a twentieth-century American public intellectual, offered another helpful perspective; he described blame as a societal ritual of purification. To blame, according to Burke, one must identify a scapegoat, load a collection of social ills onto that scapegoat, ritualistically banish the scapegoat, and then reunite a newly purified society without the scapegoated entity and the ills it had come to embody.²² Burke's ritualistic description of blame has been used as the basis for social scientific inquiry, but I will not try to describe and then demonstrate the existence of a series of steps universal to the rhetoric of school reform. Instead, I want to draw attention to Burke's keen sense of audience. Blaming in public is not done for the sake of the blamed, or the "scapegoated," as Burke would have it. In fact, the accused are typically a means, not an end, for blaming. Thus, as a tool for influencing public policy, blame is not committed for the person or persons being blamed, but for some larger audience who is persuaded by witnessing blame.

I call this politically calculated performance of accusation undertaken as a means of persuasion "public blame." I append *public* to indicate a concern with what blame accomplishes as popular, civic discourse—that is, how blame, through its circulation, calls people together to take collective action.²³ This means addressing empirical examples of blame as they are employed to influence the world of human affairs. This distinction is important because most of the contemporary philosophical study of blame concerns blame in the form of hypothetical cases.²⁴ Although the intricacy and justice of blame, especially interpersonal blame, can be elegantly unfolded in a philosophical vacuum, that unfolding holds static the probabilistic elements that make blaming both spectacular and political as public speech. Blame deployed in the course of the public discussion of education policy is not hypothetical, but empirical. It is blame out in the world engaged in the messy process of influencing human affairs. Unlike private

or interpersonal blame, public blame is not defined by its *perfection* of justice, but by its *presentation* of justice. In this way, public blame is always a political act loosed into a discursive context already swimming with rival acts of blame. The comparison of these competing and public acts of blame organizes and directs my analysis. To compare them, I draw on Burke, Aristotle, Strawson, and a rotating cast of scholars who have written about the nature of blame, rhetoric, and policy making. I also break down public blame into a rhetorical act with three critical elements, each of which serves as an entry point for critical inquiry.

First, public blame is a political animal. It is a persuasive performance fashioned for the benefit of a strategically selected audience. That audience usually has some sought-after political power and, perhaps as a consequence, is typically invited to join in blaming someone or something else. Importantly, the target audience for public blame is only rarely the blamed themselves. For example, when a politician or policy advocate declares the public schools are to blame for failing America's children, he or she might reasonably hope that such an accusation might convince parents, citizens, or elected officials to support some policy or candidacy. However, such an accusation will probably not get the people who collectively make up the public schools to acquiesce to their supposed culpability. In response to blame, the blamed party might issue a rebuttal, but the blamer's goal is to exert influence over the target audience, not those who are blamed.²⁵ For the accuser, the accused are a rhetorical prop. The blamed party's response, the accuracy or fairness of the accusation, and the consequence of the accusation for those blamed are largely beside the point.

Second, public blame traffics in agency. Because public blame has a deliberative purpose, it seeks the assent of the public on not just the fault of the accused, but also the implications of that fault. For Strawson, blaming says as much about what the accuser thinks about the way the world works as it does about what the accuser thinks about the accused. Public blame is similar. It foregrounds certain causal relationships and backgrounds others, creating a landscape of action and consequence onto which cer-

tain policy decisions can be successfully projected and others cannot. If the public schools are solely responsible for educational failure, and educational failure is defined as declining test scores, then policies targeting children's home lives or art education are largely irrelevant to school reform. Public blame thereby creates a loaded context for judgment. This context is not usually as polarized as the diametric choice between determinism and free will, but successful blame narratives articulate assumptions about race, economics, gender, and other categories of social analysis, causally relating those categories to academic achievement and other education policy goals. Looking at blame in the context of education policy offers an opportunity to improve the understanding of how acts of blame fit their social context and how they try to exert pressure on that context, especially as they rearrange the power to act. That is, as they rearrange agency.

Third, public blame is ethical. In one sense, to blame is to enact ethical judgment.²⁶ When a policy advocate blames in public, he or she assigns culpability to someone or something for some public problem. Such an accusation must be grounded, explicitly or implicitly, in a set of expectations for ethical action that the accused has presumably violated. For example, if an education reformer accuses public school officials of failing American students as evidenced by low test scores, that reformer must rely on members of the target audience recognizing bad test scores as evidence of educational malfeasance, perhaps a failure of due diligence. This ethical dimension to blaming—as well as praising—is why Aristotle identified the celebration of a socially held value as the rhetorical purpose of epideictic oratory. This social dimension is critical for blame in the context of public advocacy. As policy advocates attribute fault to the person or persons being blamed, they simultaneously attribute their expectations for ethical action to their audience, the target of public blame's persuasion. Thus, through public blame, policy advocates align themselves ethically with their audience, laying the foundations for a coalition of conscience.

However, public blame is ethical in yet another sense. Public blame expresses a set of ethical expectations for others, but must also live up to

the ethical expectations others have for it. As a persuasive strategy carried out through public discourse, public blame affects the quality of our civic life in a paradoxical manner. Public blame can be a courageous act of civic faith calling fellow citizens to action by appealing to a shared judgment as well as a shared belief in the justness of democratic change. However, when it is perceived as disingenuous, public blame can erode the prospects for shared judgment and democratic change. When public blame becomes ubiquitous, perfunctory, or detached from the bounds of good taste by the gamesmanship of mass persuasion, it not only fails to persuade, but also undermines the democratic culture it relies upon to make change in the world. We call such failed attempts at public blame “passing the buck,” “throwing under the bus,” “ratting out,” and so forth. And, when we sense we have seen too many of them, we throw up our hands. These abuses of blame damage the reputations of public blame and those who commit it. But unfortunately, they also damage the reputation of political dialogue itself. Over time, our public discourse can lose its vitality, integrity, and sophistication if it devolves into a blame game. In this way, blaming has consequences for the entire discussion of education policy.

This brings me to a brief, but important disclaimer. More often than not, I argue in this book that blame is ill-advised or at cross-purposes with what I will defend as reasonable expectations for the quality of civic speech. Despite my concerns, I will not argue that blame, even in the form of public blame, is inherently bad. I also will not argue that public blame should be eliminated. Indeed, I will partake in plenty of public blaming, and like the advocates in the case studies I examine, I hope to use blame to persuade a target audience of scholars and education professionals to agree with me. Still, my primary goal throughout this book is to reveal how public blame pursues and, from time to time, achieves persuasion in the discourse of education policy. By peering behind blame’s public facade, I hope readers will take away a broadened and empowered understanding of the rhetoric of policy advocacy. I also hope to encourage if not fewer, then more thoughtful acts of public blame. So, although this is a

book about education policy as sophistry, it is neither a model of blameless public argument nor a defense of reckless speech. I believe there is a broad and accommodating middle road of responsible public dialogue between those two extremes, a path I both implicitly advocate and explicitly seek to inhabit in these pages.

***DISSOI PSOGOI*: FIVE CASE STUDIES AND ONE PARADOX IN THE RHETORIC OF EDUCATION POLICY**

The sophists were the pre-Socratic rhetoricians of the ancient Greek world. They were also its teachers. Often competing with each other, the sophists wrote and delivered speeches in celebrated displays of public eloquence. They also taught Greek men of means the skills of public argument. The sophists made many important contributions to the intellectual history of public speech in the Western world, all before Plato coined the term *rhetoric*.²⁷ Among their contributions is the concept *dissoi logoi*, which translates to “opposing words.” For the sophists, this was both an educational exercise and a belief. As an exercise, *dissoi logoi* amounted to an argument.²⁸ Those engaged in it would speak in opposition to each other, using words to oppose other words. As a concept, *dissoi logoi* signaled a belief held by the sophists that, in any given case, there are always words available to oppose those already spoken. In more familiar terms, the sophists believed that there is always room for debate. This belief in the immutability of opposing rhetorical action and the educational value of exploring the range of potential responses undergirds all rhetorical analysis.

Inspired by the sophistic tradition of public argument, this book is an investigation of *dissoi psogoi*, or “opposing blames.” As a consequence, two mutually reinforcing purposes drove the selection of a series of representative episodes that tell this history of education reform. On the one hand, this study is a step toward the description of public blame as a diverse and consequential rhetorical form. In order to focus on blame as a rhetorical strategy that can be deployed in a number of ways to influence a particular

policy process, confining the case studies to education holds that policy process somewhat static. Each of the instances of blaming that serves as a case study advances a particular education policy as a solution for the educational failures of the public schools. By exploring five case studies, all from the relatively recent history of education policy, this book compares how each policy advocate concocted his or her own kind of public blame in an effort to influence a policy process they all perceive themselves as sharing. Like the sophists who had faith in *dissoi logoi*, I believe that there is a rhetorical education to be had in an extended engagement with *dissoi psogoi*. In these cases, blame works in combination with other rhetorical forms: *ad hominem*, self-blame, metaphor, scapegoating, and confession. Together, the five case studies provide insight into a broad range of blame's rhetorical dimensions as public discourse.

Additionally, by selecting five case studies in the popular discourse of education policy since the founding of the ED, a particular kind of historical narrative emerges, a history of rhetorical practice. Federal education policy in the United States experienced dramatic change from 1980 to 2010. Education scholars have offered a range of explanations for how the federal role in public education suddenly expanded so much, and with the surprising support of political actors who typically oppose the expansion of federal power. Some researchers have attributed this change to overlapping interests among institutional policy entrepreneurs, others have identified colliding interests between large historical movements in education, another camp declared the dawning of a new political era in the early 1980s, and still others have constructed new models of political action such as the paradigm shift.²⁹ I point to a public conversation awash in blame and argue that the coalescence that took form in the early 1980s was not so much a commitment to any particular vision of America's educational future, but instead a consensus about a particular strategy used to argue for it. The era of accountability is more the product of the unanimity of public blame in the discourse of education reform than any consensus around how education ought to be governed.³⁰ To make this case, I exam-

ine five prominent acts of public blame from the 1980s through the 2000s, each in its own chapter.

From the 1980s, I examine two successful appeals for education reform: an hour of public television featuring the educational philosophy of Milton Friedman and the National Commission on Excellence in Education's (NCEE) influential report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. As with all of the case studies, Friedman and the NCEE presented a compelling appeal for education reform by laying blame for the failures of US public education. In the Friedman chapter, I give his rhetorical success well-deserved attention by examining the deliberative consequences of directing blame at an other. Friedman's success as an advocate for school vouchers relied on his savvy decision to blame bureaucrats using their professional status as an *ad hominem*. Friedman characterized himself as a brave individual resisting the bureaucrats' collectivizing influence thereby modeling a political posture for disgruntled parents. In the NCEE chapter, I reconsider the widely acknowledged rhetorical success of *A Nation at Risk* by examining how the NCEE blamed the American people for the failures of public education. Capitalizing on their ability as fellow Americans to both place and accept blame, the report authors used self-directed blame to create a monologic appeal that appeared to be the product of a dialogue that did not happen. This rhetorical sleight of hand foreclosed the *stasis* of cause, propelling the public discourse of education toward new policy.

From the 1990s, I examine Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. Despite its popularity and venerable argument, I judge Kozol's book a rhetorical failure. Accounting for the failures of public education by blaming environmental factors instead of people, *Savage Inequalities* succeeded at garnering a great deal of public attention, but deployed blame counterproductively to its policy goals. Taking issue with the nearly universal praise for *Savage Inequalities*, I compare the book's policy advocacy, desegregation, with its public reception as an impassioned appeal for funding reform.³¹ To accomplish this assessment, I argue

that Kozol's choice to write metaphorically about East St. Louis as a third world city contributed to a popular misreading of his book.

From the 2000s, I examine the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the public scholarship of Diane Ravitch. Both cases direct blame at governmental systems. I argue that as NCLB legislated a federal system of standards-based accountability, it simultaneously instituted a preferred blame narrative for public education. By scapegoating street-level bureaucrats, the rhetoric of accountability serves the interests of legislators, removing responsibility for the success and failure of public education from lawmakers and placing it on educational professionals. In its attempt to provide an official answer to the question of who or what is to blame for the purported failures of US public education, NCLB opened a discussion about systems of governance as the critical problem, laying the foundation for itself to become the target of blame for those same failures.³²

To explore the blaming of NCLB, I follow the conversion of Diane Ravitch from a firm supporter of the law to one of its most vehement detractors. In her op-eds, blog posts, and books on the subject, Ravitch gave voice to white, working-class discomfort with the desegregation by category created when NCLB lumped many rural and suburban schools together with inner-city schools as failing. In the popular critiques to which Ravitch lends her support, such as the narrowing of curricula and the inability of standardized testing to quantify the nuances of good schooling, I find Ravitch reiterating an apprehension with the deceptive nature of NCLB. Reframed as such, Ravitch succeeded at both blaming NCLB for the educational failures of the 2000s and excusing her support for it during that same time.

Across five episodes over three decades, a remarkably stable consensus emerges in the supposedly contentious politics of public education. Nearly everyone agrees that the US public school system is failing to live up to expectations. This broad consensus makes fertile ground for the laying of blame, a rhetorical form that continuously reenergizes the pursuit of

education reform. As scholars reconsider the wisdom of perpetual education reform, they must also reconsider the wisdom of unending blame, reform's discursive fountain of youth. To imagine a different educational future, we must ask how it is we have been imagining the educational past throughout the era of achievement. Thus, in two final synthesis chapters, I consider the paradox of public blame—that blame both calls upon and undermines our civic faith. In the first such chapter, I consider how the ubiquity of blame in the discourse of education policy has helped create an era of accountability in education policy and how that era now threatens the publicness of schooling. Then, in the second synthesis chapter, I consider alternatives to the contemporary overreliance on public blame, such as blaming less frequently, using praise, and developing an interpretive tradition that attends to the rhetoric of education reform.