

Introduction

I started teaching in New York City in 2006, four years into the implementation of No Child Left Behind and three years into Michael Bloomberg's mayoral control of the city's schools. The first school that I taught at was a test-prep machine, where music and dance classes were transformed into workbook-heavy sessions of literacy and math, and where students told me whether they were a "1, 2, 3, or 4"—their score on the previous year's exam—on the first day of school. The schools where I taught in the years after experienced budget cuts, annual threats of teacher layoffs, a charter school co-location, extensive teacher turnover, and an obsession with data and test scores that permeated each school's culture. The middle school where my students once held debates, role-playings, and simulations, read primary texts, and wrote analytical and personal essays has since been closed, the space transferred over to one of the many charter school chains that are now inescapable in Harlem. My experience is not unique among teachers in this era of accountability. Ask most teachers about what education reform has meant for their school and they'll have a list of examples just as long.

Since 2001, education reform has been largely defined by the sweeping federal laws under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama that embraced an accountability agenda. The first was the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (NCLB), followed by Race to the Top (RTTT) in 2009 and the No Child Left Behind waivers in 2011. But education reform in this period has also been defined by a slew of other characters and groups who have honed a particular message about what's best for American public schools and the students they serve. They include a number of education nonprofit organizations like the Education Trust and alternative certification programs like Teach for America. High-profile state and local leaders like John White of Louisiana, Joel Klein in New York, and Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC, count themselves as education reformers. Major think tanks, including the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, have contributed research and media content. And a number of very wealthy foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and

the Broad Foundation, have donated millions of dollars to the cause. Combined, they constitute what is now known as the education reform movement, and their collective goals have been defined by an aggressive push to measure and track student progress, hold educators and schools accountable for student learning, and expand school choice. They abhor the status quo and favor bold initiatives that can rattle a system that they see as impervious to change, arguing that education is the civil rights cause of our generation.

In many ways, this movement has succeeded in creating striking changes in public education over the past sixteen years. Consider the following: states are now mandated by the federal government to administer high-stakes tests in seven out of thirteen grades of school every year, almost triple the number required before NCLB.¹ The United States is the closest we've ever been to having a set of national standards, with forty-two states currently implementing the Common Core State Standards.² Teacher tenure laws, once seen as a hallmark of the profession, have been changed in at least eighteen states, repealed in four states, and are under court review in at least three more.³ Teacher evaluation systems, most of which were previously based in principal observations, were tied to student test scores in forty-five states by 2015.⁴ Large high schools that once defined urban school systems have been broken up in the nation's biggest cities, creating hundreds of small schools in their place.⁵ School boards that used to dominate local decision making around education have been removed from power in many districts in favor of mayoral control, state takeovers, or management organizations overseeing portfolios of schools.⁶

In 2001 there were fewer than two thousand charter schools. In 2015 there were almost seven thousand, and the numbers continue to climb.⁷ The first all-charter school district in the country was established in New Orleans in 2014.⁸ Meanwhile, tens of thousands of schools have been shut down. In the year before NCLB, 1,193 schools were closed. Three years later, 2,168 schools were closed in that year alone. Zero-tolerance discipline policies, first introduced in the 1990s, reached their peak in the 2000s, with out-of-school suspension rates rising disproportionately for nonwhite students.⁹ Major school desegregation policies were overturned, repealed, or neglected during this period, resulting in the highest levels of racial and economic school segregation the United States has seen in four decades.¹⁰ The fact that so much of this appears to be part of the normal landscape of education now speaks to how much things have actually changed.

What has all of this meant for public education in the United States? What should happen now that the latest version of federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), has turned so much of the power of education back to the states? Before jumping headfirst into the next wave of change, we need to take stock of what just happened. And to get the full picture, we need to hear from some people who have been unwisely ignored when it comes to education reform and policy: teachers.

Inside Our Schools goes beyond the headlines, speeches, public relations campaigns, and glossy magazine covers to tell a different story of education reform since 2001, combining research with the voices of teachers from around the country who have experienced these reforms firsthand. The book is organized around five recurring buzzwords that the mainstream education reform movement has used to define their policies: accountability, quality, choice, failure, and equity. Chapter introductions give an overview of education policy and research in each of these areas, but the testimony of teachers makes up the bulk of the book by design. For all the time that we've spent talking *about* teachers, *Inside Our Schools* offers a much needed platform for their stories and experiences to be included in the conversation.

In creating the “primers” for each section, I've tried to squeeze fifteen-plus years of policy, rhetoric, media coverage, and research into about ten pages per theme. I've also attempted to show multiple perspectives on different issues and have sought to bring some nuance to how these conversations have played out on the national stage. Clearly, this is a fool's errand. There will be aspects of each topic that are no doubt missing. And, as a former history teacher, I found it painful to not reach further back in time to make broader connections between the trajectory of education reform and the much longer roots of educational inequity. Despite the omissions that page limits require, my hope is that these essays give readers enough of a picture about what has happened under NCLB and where education reform has landed that they can form their own opinions about what should happen next.

That being said, as a group of public school educators, we have a clear point to make about public education policy. Top-down education reform as it has existed since NCLB—often punitive, distrustful of those who do the actual work in education, and divorced from the realities of schools—has failed. We believe that local, state, and federal policy should empower educators and communities to create a more equitable education for all

students. This is a vision that believes in the holistic development of all students in ways that honor and support their strengths, needs, opinions, communities, and cultures. It relies on capacity building, not threats, and views teachers, not policy makers, as the experts on student learning.

This point of view will come across through the introductions, but it will come alive in the stories from teachers. In my last year of teaching, I began to work on this book specifically to highlight their perspective. It felt like my experience with accountability-based reforms in my classroom was so different from what was being portrayed in the media and in politics; even my closest friends were confused about what was changing in education. I thought that if only people knew what was really happening, they would have a lot more to say. In 2013, I began outreach to every teacher organization, union, college and university education department, education writer and commentator, parent association, and community group I could find across the country to ask for other teachers who wanted to share their stories.

After four years and over a thousand e-mails, I ended up with the twenty-five contributors to this collection. As you'll see, they are an incredible group, full of writers, scholars, union leaders, parents, and activists. They include veteran teachers, award-winning teachers, and people brand-new to the profession. Collectively, they move the conversation about improving education from rhetorical abstractions to the real world, one that is populated with real kids who thrive and struggle in real classrooms every day. These teachers bring readers directly inside their schools, providing an honest look at what it takes to do the work of helping kids become their best possible selves. In the process, they provide a referendum on reform, calling out many of the policies that have made the day-to-day work of teaching students harder, more frustrating, and less just.

Anyone who has been a teacher knows that it's very hard to sit back and watch something go wrong in your classroom. Driven by a commitment to their students, many teachers have fought against the policies that they have found so harmful. Sometimes this shows up in the form of teacher activism, which has grown tremendously during this time period. But most of the time, teachers' responses to the failure of policy don't make the headlines. They occur in the myriad ways that teachers create and implement practices in their classrooms and schools that run counter to mainstream thinking about education. Each section of the book has stories of these alternatives too. This is not a "how-to" book, so there are not step-by-step

instructions for how these practices could be implemented on a wide scale. They are included to spark a more imaginative conversation about what is possible for states, who now have more control to shape their own educational agendas under ESSA. While the stories themselves are based on real experiences, in almost every case, the names have been changed. A few times though, the author was so proud of the work that their school, students, or colleagues did, they asked us to keep the real names, with everyone in the story's full permission. In those cases, we've noted that in the text.

In the course of reading about the reality of how these policies have impacted schools across the country, and the care, passion, and intelligence with which many teachers work to provide a high-quality, equitable education in the face of obstacles, I hope that it becomes clear that educators must be collaborators in the next stage of education policy reforms. And if you are connected to a school yourself, I hope that you'll want to add your voice to the discussion, too. As a start, you can visit us at www.insideourschools.com, share your experience, and watch, listen and read others' stories too.

I left teaching after six years because I was frustrated, and because, selfishly, it was hard to watch a never-ending stream of bad policy rain down on my students. It felt wrong to be a part of something that I felt morally opposed to. I quit teaching because the reforms enacted in this time period stand in stark opposition to what I believe schools can and should be for students, their families, and their communities. After working on this book, I think I made the wrong decision. The teachers in this collection call on me—and, I hope, on everyone reading their stories—to not accept and give up in the face of these challenges, but to work to make them better. In the process, their stories create the imperative for a new kind of change in education. As Dr. Andre M. Perry has said, “We need less ‘reform’ and more social justice.”¹¹ In whatever role you play—as an educator, voter, student, parent, community member, politician, journalist, or activist—I hope this book leaves you feeling informed and inspired about what is possible inside our schools.