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Are our “good” schools really good enough?



The case for suburban school change is clear, but no one is making it

by Peter Cunningham (<http://headinthesandblog.org/author/peter-cunningham/>) on June 13, 2017 (<http://headinthesandblog.org/2017/06/case-suburban-school-change-clear-no-one-making/>) in Blog (<http://headinthesandblog.org/category/blog/>) • 0 Comments (<http://headinthesandblog.org/2017/06/case-suburban-school-change-clear-no-one-making/#respond>)

School reform advocate Derrell Bradford (https://www.the74million.org/article/bradford-the-politics-partisanship-of-americas-education-reform-debate-time-for-a-suburban-strategy?utm_source=The+74+Million+Newsletter&utm_campaign=9780006019-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_05_18&utm_medium=email&utm_te) and policy writer Andy

Rotherham (<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2017-03-30/what-education-reformers-can-learn-from-trumps-health-care-failure>) hit on it. Illinois education writer Tracy Dell'Angela (<http://headinthesandblog.org/2017/05/political-play-pushback-mediocrity-need-charter-schools-suburbs/>) has a blog focused on it. Teacher/education writer Robert Pondiscio (<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2016-11-02/blame-reformers-if-massachusetts-charter-school-ballot-question-fails>) said it was a factor in the anti-charter vote in Massachusetts last fall. And former Education Secretary Arne Duncan (<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/11/arne-duncan-common-core-comment-09>) famously broached the subject in 2013.

“It” is the long overdue conversation about educational quality in America’s suburban and rural communities and whether education reform has a bigger role to play outside cities. Equally important is the potential impact on education politics.

For the longest time, education reform has been focused almost entirely on low-income urban communities of color where underperformance is concentrated. Left out of the conversation are tens of millions of suburban and rural parents with kids in schools with middling performance or worse.

The case for improving schools in working class and middle-class White America is not complicated. Average college entrance exam scores (<http://blog.prepscholar.com/average-sat-and-act-scores-by-stated-adjusted-for-participation-rate>) hover right around the “college readiness” level, meaning an awful lot of kids are below—and that doesn’t count the millions who don’t even take the tests or who drop out of high school. They’re not all poor.

The false assumption that suburban schools are widely preparing kids for college

In fact, only about 40 percent of young people today earn a four-year college degree while two-thirds of new jobs require it. Nearly half of kids taking remedial courses in college are middle-class (<https://edreformnow.org/policy-briefs/out-of-pocket-the-high-cost-of-inadequate-high-schools-and-high-school-student-achievement-on-college-affordability/>). That money comes right out of the pockets of middle-class families (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/10/opinion/guess-whos-taking-remedial-classes.html?_r=1) who falsely assume their suburban schools are preparing their kids for college.

By one admittedly subjective standard developed by Washington Post writer Jay Mathews, just 12 percent (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/jays-americas-most-challenging-high-schools-main-column/2017/05/03/eebf0288-2617-11e7-a1b3-faff0034e2de_story.html?utm_term=.1e1c97ba3633) of American high schools are truly challenging. And with the cost of college increasingly out of reach for middle-class families and millions of young people leaving high school with few marketable skills, the need for better skills-training in high school is real.

While the case for change may be clear, no one is making it. Reformers on the left don't really have the sway with right-leaning suburban and rural voters. They're focused on inner-city people of color and the complicated dance they must do with their traditional political allies—particularly teachers unions—to help drive reform.

Reformers on the right face little political risk focusing on low-income urban communities or challenging unions, but it's much harder for them to push reform to parents who spent a lot of money to live in an expensive suburb. Public opinion surveys invariably find that these parents think their own schools are fine. Who wants to burst their bubble?

To their credit, conservative policy analysts Jay Greene (<http://educationnext.org/when-the-best-is-mediocre/>) and Mike Petrilli (<https://edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/flypaper/2012/the-case-for-public-school-choice-in-the-suburbs.html>) wrote about suburban educational mediocrity in 2012, pointing out that some of America's most affluent suburbs underperform on international tests and arguing for greater school choice in the suburbs. But the conversation has never really gotten off the ground and the new federal education law essentially gives all but the lowest-performing schools a pass.

Data collected by the Collaborative for Student Success (<http://honestygap.org/what-is-the-honesty-gap/>) shows an “honesty gap” between many state tests and the national test known as NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). For example, in 2014-15, the State of Iowa had a 40-point gap between the number of eighth-graders “proficient” on the state test and the number “proficient” on NAEP, and a 39-point gap in fourth-grade reading. Texas had a 43-point gap in both eighth-grade math and fourth-grade reading.

Parents think their kids are on-track—but they aren't

In plain English, this means that some states are telling parents their kids are on track to college when they really aren't. Arne Duncan has been saying this for years (<http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/116255-duncan-says-schools-have->

been-lying-to-children-parents). The current Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, should echo the message.

Reformers should never stop talking about racial and economic achievement gaps, but reform could simultaneously shine more of a light on educational mediocrity outside cities. We could help Republicans in Congress and in statehouses across America understand why education reform is not just an urban issue and why higher standards, meaningful accountability and school choice help all kids.

Improving all schools is not only an economic imperative but also a political necessity. As others have pointed out, as long as suburbanites drive state elections, urban-focused education reform will remain a non-voting issue in most places. By growing the reform tent to include suburban and rural communities, support for change will grow. Over time, it could also broaden the base for more equitable funding.

In an ideal world, the bipartisan consensus that sustained education reform for 25 years will enter a new era of public support based less on what's good for the poorest children and more on what's good for all children.

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Peter Cunningham is the executive director of Education Post. He recently served as assistant secretary for communications and outreach in the U.S. Department of Education during the Obama Administration's first term. Prior to that he worked with Arne Duncan when he was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools. Peter serves on several non-profit boards, including