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Grading the Education Reformers: Steven Brill Gives Them Much Too Easy a Ride*

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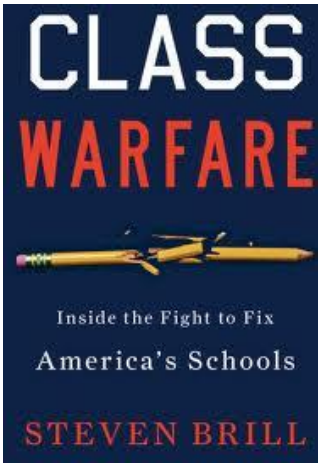

If you saw *Waiting for "Superman,"*[1] Steven Brill's tale in *Class Warfare* will be familiar. The founder of *Court TV* offers another polemic against teacher unions and a paean to self-styled "education reformers." But even for those who follow education policy, he offers an eye-opening read that should not be missed. Where the movie evoked valiant underdogs waging an uphill battle against an ossified behemoth, Brill's briskly written book exposes what critics of the reformers have long suspected but could never before prove: just how insular, coordinated, well-connected, and well-financed the reformers are. *Class Warfare* reveals their single-minded efforts to

* This is an expanded version of a review of *Class Warfare*, by Steven Brill, that appeared in Slate.com on August 29, 2011. http://www.slate.com/id/2302578/

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suppress any evidence that might challenge their mission to undermine the esteem in which most Americans held their public schools and teachers. These crusaders now *are* the establishment, as arrogant as any that preceded them.

Brill's heroes make a high-profile gallery. They are public-school critics like former New York and Washington, D.C. schools chancellors Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee. They also include charter school operators David Levin (KIPP) and Eva Moskowitz (Harlem Success Academies), as well as alternative teacher and principal recruiters Wendy Kopp (Teach for America) and Jon Schnur (New Leaders for New Schools). Their cause was advanced by Robert Gordon at the Democratic Party's think-tank adjunct, the Center for American Progress, before Gordon moved on to oversee education policy at the Office of Management and Budget. The reformers' ranks boast billionaires Bill Gates and Eli Broad, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, former White House chief of staff (and now Chicago mayor) Rahm Emanuel, and President Obama himself. And they don't lack for savvy, richly endowed representation. Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), a lobbying, political action, and communications campaign rolled into one, has brought them all together. Lavishly supported by the newfound wealth of young Wall Street hedge fund managers answerable to no one, DFER's troops have been working overtime to radically transform American public education.

Steven Brill is the founder of CourtTV and *American Lawyer* magazine. Brill is a graduate of Deerfield Academy and Yale University (B.A., 1972; J.D., 1975). Among his other writings are *The Teamsters* (1978) and *After: How America Confronted the September 12th Era* (2003).

Brill's villains are Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond (who argues[2] that fully trained and certified teachers outperform Teach for America's Ivy League graduates recruited to teach for two years in inner-city schools after only brief summer training), and Diane Ravitch[3], once an "education reformer" herself but now a turncoat whose speeches, media appearances, and 2010 book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, attack DFER's agenda.

The case Brill's reformers make for their cause by now enjoys the status of conventional wisdom. Student achievement has been stagnant or declining for decades, even as money poured into public schools to improve teacher salaries, pensions, and working conditions

(reducing class sizes, or hiring aides to give teachers more free time). Teachers typically have abysmally low standards, especially for minorities and other disadvantaged students, who predictably fall to the level of their teachers' expectations. Although teachers' quality can be estimated by the annual growth of their students' scores on standardized tests of basic math and reading skills, teachers have not been held accountable for performance. Instead, they get lifetime job security even if students don't learn. Brill observes a union-protected teacher in a Harlem public school bellowing "how many days in a week?," caring little that students pay him no heed and wrestle on the floor instead.

Protecting this incompetence are teacher unions, whose contracts prevent principals from firing inadequate (and worse) teachers. The contracts also permit senior teachers to choose their schools, which further undermines principals' authority. Union negotiations have produced perpetually rising salaries, guaranteed even to teachers who sleep through their careers. Breaking unions' grip on public education is "*the* civil rights issue of this generation," and some hard-working, idealistic Ivy Leaguers and their allies have shown how.

The embodiment of Brill's dream is a non-union charter school teacher named Jessica Reid. A Teach for America recruit, she engages each of her Harlem fifth-graders in Shakespeare, phones parents about missed assignments, and works into the night tutoring students, meeting parents, and creating ingenious displays for the following day's lessons. It's teachers like her who propel the most-disadvantaged children on to college. But such teachers can work their wonders only in non-union charter schools that are free to fire summarily those who, though well-meaning, are less than extraordinary.

Given the perpetually discouraging landscape of education debates, a comparatively optimistic narrative like this one holds obvious appeal, and Brill's anecdotal vignettes are stirring. Without doubt, today's public schools tolerate too much incompetence and preserve some spending priorities that make no sense. But you might expect a veteran of Court TV, never mind an advocate of rigorous education, to appreciate the need to fairly present opposing arguments and evidence, even if only to show how they might be

refuted. Brill's failure to do just that is all too symptomatic of the reformers' campaign more generally, a campaign that got its own start by calling for critical scrutiny of conventional assumptions.

The possibility that teachers unions are far from the biggest problem facing disadvantaged students is not one Brill or DFER want to broach. You wouldn't know from *Class Warfare* that students don't do any better where teacher collective bargaining is prohibited. In non-union Texas, for example, students perform about the same as socioeconomically similar students in union-dominated New York. This is no secret, noted frequently by skeptics of the reformers' agenda. I would have welcomed Brill's thoughts about how it can be reconciled with his story.

The complex answer might lie in the social and economic conditions that bring many children to schools, regular *and* charter, unprepared to take sufficient advantage of what even the most dedicated and inspired teachers can offer. Brill and his heroes have no patience for discussions[4] of, say, children with barely literate parents who rarely read aloud to them, or with unemployed parents too stressed themselves to offer real support, or with untreated asthma that kept them up the night before, or with no place to study because they are now homeless or doubled up with relatives. For the reformers, these are union-inspired excuses, so addressing America's vast and growing inequalities has no place on their agenda. It's clear that more flexible union contracts would indeed be a good step, but unless other obstacles to high achievement are addressed, it isn't likely to make the difference Brill hopes.

Alas, the reformers' claim that non-union charter schools demonstrate that teacher idealism and dedication alone can prepare the most disadvantaged children for college success doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Given the charter school hype in *Waiting for Superman* and *Class Warfare*, it may seem hard to believe that students in charter schools do not, on average, outperform those in comparable regular schools. But abundant data show[5] just that, and the most careful studies have confirmed it, most recently[6] one by a Hoover Institution researcher who was predisposed to credit charter school success.

Neither Brill's text nor his notes identify the studies he relies on for his evidence to the contrary, but I can imagine what two might be. One, by Stanford professor Caroline Hoxby[7], looked at New York charter schools; Gates Foundation researcher Tom Kane[8] conducted the other, examining Boston charter schools. But both the New York[9] and Boston[10] conclusions have been undermined by methodological difficulties, and most academic researchers agree that they fail to refute the frequently replicated conclusion that charter schools overall have not demonstrated paths to superior performance. Evidently Brill is not persuaded by this consensus, but he never explains why.

Instead, Brill invokes "the central evidentiary value of charters like KIPP or Harlem Success: They proved that intense, effective teaching could overcome poverty and other obstacles and that, as Klein liked to say, demography does not have to be destiny." Again, Brill provides no sources. In fact, there is nothing but anecdotal evidence of KIPP's purported success. Its results may well be impressive. But KIPP's promoters have never sought the kind of careful study that could establish whether its students have the long term success that education aims for. And that means not just better passing rates on low-quality standardized tests of basic math and reading, but college completion, steady employment, and low crime rates. KIPP charter schools have existed for more than 15 years now; there have been, and continue to be, many lost opportunities to track such data.

In any case, KIPP and Harlem Success Academies are selective, making comparisons with regular schools challenging. Brill asserts that because charter schools accept students by lottery, their enrollment is representative of the neighborhoods where they locate. This is demonstrably untrue. Parents who choose to enter such lotteries, agree to monitor homework, enforce school rules, and attend parent conferences are representative of some, but not most, parents in inner-city neighborhoods. Some years ago, I asked a research assistant to interview teachers in neighboring regular schools who had urged parents to enroll their children in the Bronx KIPP lottery. The teachers consistently reported[11] that they encouraged only parents who were most sophisticated about education

and most likely to support children in an exacting school like KIPP.

Such parents are certainly more disadvantaged than suburban parents, but that's not the point: To be demonstrably superior, selective charter school students should outperform comparable students in regular schools. Perhaps they do, but that has yet to be shown. And there is now considerable evidence that both KIPP[12] and the Success Academies[13] have high attrition rates. Students who don't succeed are encouraged or required to return to regular schools. For selective charter schools, this may not be bad policy, but it vitiates comparisons with regular neighborhood schools that must take all comers, including students who rebel against learning, those with expensive and difficult-to-treat disabilities, and those who flunk out of charters.

KIPP's David Levin acknowledges to Brill that only 40 percent of KIPP graduates actually complete college. After adjusting for KIPP's selectivity at the front (lottery participation) and back (attrition of less successful students), this could still be better than graduation rates for students from regular neighborhood schools. But it may not be enough better to justify the absolutism of the reformers' crusade. I wish Brill had examined just a little data to better estimate KIPP's comparative record on this front.

Central to the reformers' argument is the claim that radical change is essential because student achievement (especially for minority and disadvantaged children) has been flat or declining for decades. This is, however, false. The only consistent data on student achievement come from a federal sample, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Though you would never know it from the state of public alarm about education, the numbers show that regular public school performance has skyrocketed in the last two decades to the point that, for example, black elementary school students now have better math skills than whites had only 20 years ago. (There has also been progress for middle schoolers in math and in reading; and less, but not insubstantial, progress for high schoolers.) The reason test score gaps have barely narrowed is that white students have also improved, at least at the elementary and middle school levels. The

causes of these truly spectacular gains[14] are unknown, but they are probably inconsistent with the idea that typical inner-city teachers are content to watch students wrestle on the classroom floor instead of learning.

And the data might raise some questions about one of the reformist moves of which Brill is most proud: the Obama Administration's use of a little-noticed $5 billion provision of the 2009 stimulus bill to induce states to adopt the reformers' program (they call it "Race to the Top") of rapidly multiplying charter schools and evaluating teachers, in large part, on the basis of their students' test score growth. Brill is notably uninterested in exploring the validity of this approach to teacher assessment. Impartial policymakers and nationally renowned educational statisticians have almost uniformly weighed in against[15] the practice. As they point out, the same teachers, using the same instructional methods with similar students, can be deemed effective one year and ineffective the next, because so much more enters into student performance than teacher skill. Scholars also observe that even if test scores were accurate, holding teachers accountable for math and reading scores creates incentives to minimize attention to the sciences, history, civics, the arts and music, physical education, and character development.

It is not that the reformers (or at least some of them) don't know any better. They are at their most incoherent when they themselves acknowledge the necessity of interventions that might bring disadvantaged children to school more ready to learn, yet simultaneously advocate tough accountability systems that take no account of whether those interventions have been attempted. In a TIME interview[16] just last week, for example, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recounted his earlier experiences as superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools:

> If children can't see the blackboard, they're going to have a hard time learning so we have to get them eyeglasses. We used to get literally tens of thousands of kids eyeglasses every year. If children aren't fed and are hungry, they're going to have a hard time concentrating, so we fed tens of thousands of kids three meals a day. We had a couple of thousand kids we were particularly

> worried about so very quietly we would send them home Friday afternoons with a backpack full of food because we worried about them not eating over the weekend.

Although Brill also interviewed Duncan, and *Class Warfare* heaps extended praise on him for his promotion of charter schools and test-based merit pay, this short interview in TIME has done more to expose the reformers' ideological blinders than Brill's two years of reporting. For despite Duncan's blunt reflections about the impediments to academic success facing many urban children, as Secretary he has proposed a "Blueprint" for re-authorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that would hold schools accountable for getting all children "college and career ready" by 2020, whether or not they can see the blackboard, come to school hungry every day, or eat over the weekend. And while the "Race to the Top" competition awarded points to states for expanding the charter school sector and developing data systems to tie teacher performance to student test scores, states got no points[17] for providing eyeglasses, or food for the weekend, or for implementing any other of the many practical programs that could ameliorate the social and economic hardships that do so much to impede children's ability to take advantage of what schools can offer.

The reformers' arrogance is best on display when Brill gloats about the charade of appointing anti-reformer Linda Darling-Hammond to lead Obama's official post-election education planning, while DFER, with funds from Eli Broad, wrote a secret memo for the "informal yet real education transition team." Jon Schnur organized the effort and strove to calm his nervous fellow-reformers, assuring them that the Darling-Hammond appointment was only a sop to a faction that would have no real influence, while DFER's secret memo set forth the Administration's actual policy – including the naming of key Gates Foundation and Teach for America operatives for crucial administration policy posts, and calling for use of student test scores to evaluate teachers. It is disclosures like this that make Brill's book something less than the unambiguous morality tale he aimed to present. Had the reformers been a little less sure of themselves, they might have less to answer for when their program, as it certainly must, eventually implodes.

In the final pages of *Class Warfare*, Brill reports that this January, his chief exhibit, Jessica Reid, quit her charter school job. She had worked days, nights, and weekends in a superhuman, often frustrating effort to prove that effective teaching alone could overcome the obstacles of child poverty. At 26, she found her role in the fanatical charter school crusade was taking too high a toll on her marriage and her own sense of balance. She signed up to work instead in a regular public school where, protected by union contract, her working hours and duties are now limited—perhaps too limited, but Brill's heroine saw no other choice.

Reid's decision apparently caught Brill by surprise, when he was too close to completing his manuscript, too committed to his story line, to step back and seriously consider its implications. But at least Brill, so disinclined to explore challenges to the education reformers' clichés, reported the denouement. With this sobering spoiler in mind, readers will be in a better position to evaluate the self-righteous certainty that pervades the previous pages of *Class Warfare.*

About the Reviewer

Richard Rothstein is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute. From 1999 to 2002 he was the national education columnist of *The New York Times*. He is the author of *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* (Teachers College Press and EPI, 2008) and *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Teachers College Press 2004). He is also the author of *The Way We Were? Myths and Realities of America's Student Achievement* (1998). Other recent books include *The Charter School Dust-Up: Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement* (co-authored in 2005); and *All Else Equal. Are Public and Private Schools Different?* (co-authored in 2003). Email: riroth@epi.org. List of publications: http://www.epi.org/authors/bio/rothstein_richard

ENDNOTES

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[16] http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2090299,00.html

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