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**Rooks, N. M. (2017). *Cutting school: Privatization, segregation, and the end of public education*. New York: The New Press.**

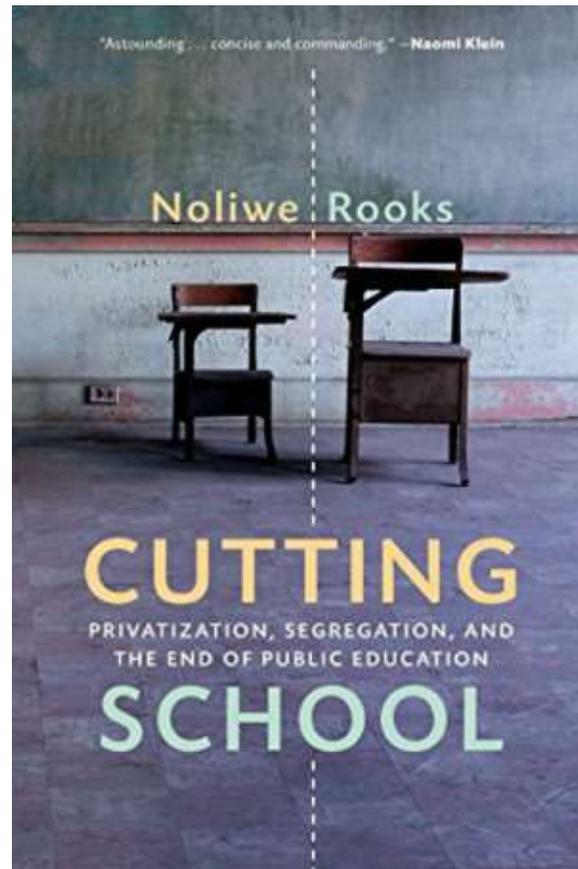
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Noliwe Rooks' superb book, *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education*, is a powerful analysis of racism, segregation, poverty, the history of Black education (and miseducation), and their relationship to the current movement to privatize public education. Please buy a copy and read it. My copy of the book is covered with underlinings, stars, asterisks, and other notations, as is my way when I become enthusiastic while reading.

She dissects the profitable business of segregation. Read it, and you will learn how cleverly the captains of finance and industry have managed to ignore the root causes of inequality of educational opportunity while profiting from the dire straits of poor children of color. In fact, as she shows, financiers and philanthropists have used and misused Black children throughout our history for their own benefit and glory, not the children's.

The book is both highly contemporary and, at the same time, probably the best history of Black education that I have ever read. Rooks understands that the fight for equality runs through the schoolhouse



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door, and she documents how white elites have managed to block access, narrow access, or literally steal from Black families trying to gain access to high-quality education. She knows that charter schools and vouchers are a sorry substitute for real solutions. She understands that the rise of the profit-driven education industry has benefited the profiteers far more than the Black children they claim to be “saving.” “Saving poor kids from failing schools” turns out to be a lucrative business, though not for the kids.

Rooks invents a new term to describe the current “reform” movement: *Segrenomics*. In her telling, a sizable number of entrepreneurs and foundations, and organizations like Teach for America, have enriched themselves while advertising their passion for equity. Segregation and poverty have given them a purpose, multiple enterprises, career paths, and profit.

She bluntly states, “The road necessarily traveled to achieve freedom and equality in the United States leads directly through public education. . . . Schools that educate the wealthy have generally had decent buildings, money for materials, a coherent curriculum, and well-trained teachers. Schools that educate poorer students and those of color too often have decrepit buildings, no funds for quality instructional materials, and little input in structure or purpose of the curriculum, and they make do with the best teachers they can find.” Differences based on class and color have been a constant in American history, and they remain so today.

Rooks notes the rise of the for-profit industry in education, now associated with charter schools, cybercharters, and other forms of school choice. The new for-profit arrangement, which she labels *segrenomics*, is “the business of profiting

specifically from high levels of racial and economic segregation. . . . The desire that some have to profit from racial and economic segregation in education, coupled with the active desire members of segregated communities of color have for quality education, has led to our current moment where quality education is for some a distant mirage, and the promise to provide it is profitable for others.”

Rooks was director of the African American studies program at Princeton University for a decade and is now director of graduate Africana studies at Cornell University. She interacted frequently with idealistic elite white college students who could not understand her skepticism about the “reform movement.”

She describes the past thirty years as an era when “government, philanthropy, business, and financial sectors have heavily invested in efforts to privatize certain segments of public education; stock schools with inexperienced, less highly paid teachers whose hiring often provides companies with a ‘finders’ fee’; outsource the running of schools to management organizations; and propose virtual schools as a literal replacement for – not just a supplement to – the brick and mortar education experience. The attraction, of course, is the large pot of education dollars that’s been increasingly available to private corporate financial interests. . . . Charter schools, charter management organizations, vouchers, virtual schools, and an alternatively certified, non-unionized teaching force represent the bulk of the contemporary solutions offered as cures for what ails communities that are upward of 80 percent Black or Latino.” Such policies are never prescribed for affluent white communities, she notes.

She suggests that those who seek to profit from racial and economic segregation should be penalized. Without a real and meaningful penalty, the profit-seekers will continue business as usual.

The fundamental argument of her book is that public education for Native American, Black, Latino, and poor youth is being purposefully unraveled, while wealthy elites are plundering the money that should have been spent on their education.

Rooks recounts the history of Teach for America, which had its beginnings at Princeton University. Wendy Kopp had an idea, visited corporate chieftains, raised money, created a powerful board of directors, and started an enterprise that became fabulously wealthy. Rooks observes that Kopp didn't spend time talking to the students or parents or the communities that she planned to save. TFA created a career path for idealistic and ambitious elite college graduates, who wanted to try their hand at teaching without committing to it as a professional obligation. TFA offered more benefits to those who joined it, she writes, than to those it claimed it wanted to "save." It provided a résumé builder and an entrée into powerful financial and political networks.

She analyzes a number of well-known "reform" organizations, not only TFA, but Democrats for Educational Reform and Students for Educational Reform. The latter was also founded at Princeton by students who realized that their venture was so lucrative, so swaddled in grants from foundations, that they dropped out of college to tend to the millions heaped upon them. Helping poor children, it turned out, was indeed a rewarding business. Rooks sees TFA, DFER, and SFER through the lens of segrenomics, business ventures that

depended on "saving" poor children without disrupting the institutional and systemic roots of poverty and racism that engulf the world in which they live. She calls out "reformers" for their insistence that they could safely ignore segregation or poverty, because their aspirations alone would be enough to "fix" the lives of poor children.

Her richly documented history of Black education in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is fascinating. In the nineteenth century, most Blacks lived in the South, and the whites who controlled the segregated South did as little as they could get away with to educate Black children. Some opposed educating Blacks altogether, while others thought that they should be equipped with no more than basic literacy and vocational training so that they could contribute to the economy, albeit as manual laborers. In the main, the Northern philanthropists adjusted their ideals to the white Southerners' low esteem for people of color. The philanthropists contributed money to build schools for Black children, but required impoverished Black communities to raise matching funds if they wanted a school. Given the desperate poverty of those communities, raising the matching funds required enormous sacrifice. In one of the most moving passages in the book, Rooks describes a 1925 meeting in a small rural town in Alabama, where a Black representative of the Rockefellers' General Education Board met with the sharecroppers to discuss raising money to build a school. The representative wrote to his supervisors that "one old man, who had seen slavery days, with all of his life's earnings in an old greasy sack, slowly drew it from his pocket, and emptied it on the table. He then turned to address the crowd and said, 'I want to see the children of my grandchildren have a chance, and

so I am giving my all.’ What he had to offer was \$10. The sum total he had been able to save throughout the totality of his life.” The assembled crowd raised \$1,300 that night and eventually contributed \$6,500 to match the gift of the Rockefellers.

As I read this, I felt a mix of emotions. Tremendous sadness but also rage at the Rockefellers, who could have simply opened their wallets and given the community the school they so desperately wanted and needed without demanding such sacrifice. The foundation officer who read this account from Alabama must have had a heart of stone. The same stories about penurious philanthropists were repeated across the South, where local white officials typically diverted – stole! – money meant for Black education and reapportioned it to white schools.

I have read other histories of Black education, but none that so deftly tied together the past and the present. The term “segrenomics” aptly captures the

financiers’ fascination with seemingly helping black children but avoiding any change in the social policies that might lift their families out of poverty and promote genuine integration. The fact that philanthropists today eagerly underwrite segregated charter schools and insist that TFA or merit pay or standardized tests can cure poverty represents continuity with their nineteenth century counterparts.

Rooks brings valuable historical, sociological, and philosophical insight into contemporary debates. Her analysis echoes the argument made by Anand Giriharadas (2018) in his book *Winners Take All*: when the wealthiest elites claim that they are “saving” the world, beware. They are actually protecting the status quo and their own dominant position in society.

You will enjoy watching this YouTube video in which Professor Rooks explains her views about education reform, elite white students, and the lingo of reform. <https://bit.ly/2TkjKOI>

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## References

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## About the Reviewer

**Diane Ravitch** is a Research Professor of Education at New York University and a historian of education. She is the Founder and President of the Network for Public Education (NPE). From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. She was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education. As Assistant Secretary, she led the federal effort to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards.

She is the author of *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2014), *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010), as well as many other widely read works.

She was elected to membership in the National Academy of Education (1979); the Society of American Historians (1984); the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1985); and as the Eleanor Roosevelt Fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences (2002). In 2010, the National Education Association selected her as its "Friend of Education" for the year. She has been awarded an honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, by the following institutions: Williams College; Reed College; Amherst College; the State University of New York; Ramapo College; St. Joseph's College of New York; Siena College; Middlebury College Language Schools; and Union College.

She is currently the most influential voice on the state of public education in America. Her blog, [dianeravitch.net](http://dianeravitch.net), has received more than 30 million hits.



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