

“Failing Public Schools”: The Consequences of the Misleading Framing of American Education Policy

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Abstract. Over the last 20 years, American K-12 education has been profoundly transformed to reflect the values and principles of market-based thinking. The article examines the powerful role that the “failing public schools” frame played in reducing American citizens’ faith in public education, eroding teacher autonomy, and opening the door to a range of market-based ideas previously resisted in American public education. Evidence is provided that there has been a dramatic increase in framing American public schools as “failing” since the 1990s, and that this framing of the situation is profoundly misleading. Negative practical consequences of this misleading framing of the situation are discussed, as is the way in which this framing of the situation provides a powerful obstacle to implementing superior educational practices. Practical suggestions for re-framing educational discussions are provided.

Keywords: educational reform, conceptual framing, failing schools, accountability movement, neoliberal policies

Introduction

We have an obligation, I think, to refuse to accept the debate as it has been framed for us. - Alfie Kohn

Whether we study educational policymakers aiming to transform schools or computer hackers seeking to influence national elections, language is increasingly being used as a key tool or weapon for bringing about substantive changes in society. Reflecting that reality, one of the most striking features of recent educational policies in the United States and some other countries has been the increasing dominance of market-oriented language such as “measurable objectives, alignment, value-added assessments, and greater accountability.”

However, given that education works very differently than do economic markets and manufacturing, it can be considered puzzling that the language and ideas of markets and manufacturing have come to dominate American K-12

education (Kumashiro, 2008; Wheatley, 2009). How did this happen, especially given that the practices ushered in by market advocates—highly standardized curricula, high-stakes testing, teaching to the test—were once widely considered to be inferior practices?

In this article, I analyze the unfolding of market-oriented education policies over recent decades, and examine the role that the “failing public schools” frame played in transforming American public education to strongly reflect the values and principles of markets and manufacturing. I conclude that the corporate-oriented policymakers were able to gain substantial control over American K-12 education because they first took control of the organizing narratives surrounding education and society. The result is that many educational practices strongly favored by teachers and researchers alike (play, project-based learning) now lie outside the boundaries of what seems acceptable according to the current framing of educational debates in America.

I begin by reviewing how the conceptual framing of issues influences thought, and then examine broader changes in American society and how those changes set the stage for a market-oriented transformation of education. I then explore the cognitive and practical consequences of Americans’ current habit of implicitly or explicitly framing their discussions of education in terms of “failing public schools.” Finally, I outline practical suggestions for more accurate and constructive framing of educational policy and practice.

Conceptual Framing

What cognitive neuroscience teaches us is that we think in terms of stories, images, and conceptual frames—short, punchy phrases such as “student achievement” and “greater accountability” (Lakoff, 2014). Language has the power to shift policy in dramatically different directions because different ways of framing an issue steer the mind towards certain solutions while excluding other possible solutions. For example, American politics has been strongly framed in terms of “smaller government, lower taxes,” and “tax relief,” and these frames can steer our minds and discussions towards cutting taxes and avoiding tax increases (Lakoff, 2014). Similarly, framing education as being about “student achievement” (i.e., test scores) steers the mind in a different direction than would discussing education in terms of “healthy whole-child development.” And just imagine the influence on policy if most Americans routinely discussed educational inequality and the growing shortage of good jobs in America as resulting not from “failing public schools” but from a “failing economy” designed to serve the needs of the wealthy few very well, while leaving everyone else struggling. Some ways of framing an issue directly teach an idea by creating and reinforcing an association in our minds. For example, repeatedly hearing or using the phrase “failing public schools” conditions our mind to associate public schools with failure. As the cognitive neuroscientist George Lakoff points out, when a certain way of framing an issue is well-established in individual’s brain and those frames are active, facts that do not fit that framing of the issue simply “bounce off”—they are rejected, ignored, or treated as crazy (Lakoff, 2014). This phenomenon explains recent research showing that when presented with facts about politics or the environment that

run counter to their dominant way of thinking, people not only have a strong tendency to reject those facts, their previous thinking is often reinforced. However, that same body of research shows that changing the framing of an issues changes the degree of acceptance of the new ideas (Khazan, 2017). In short, the language we use to discuss education or other issues powerfully influences which policies and practices seem sensible and which seem unwise or even unthinkable.

The Changing Social Context and Overarching Narratives in America

To be understood well, the stories we tell ourselves about education and the educational policies that result from those stories must be understood in the context of broader social and political developments. From the 1940s through the 1970s, the United State had a mixed-market economy in which the importance of a strong central government was rarely questioned and there was substantial faith in most public-sector institutions (Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Smith, 2012). Informed by the harsh lessons of the Gilded Age, Great Depression, and World War II, most Americans seemed to agree that government inherently does many things better than the private sector does, and does some things that the private sector will not do or cannot be trusted to do. This was America's shared overarching cultural narrative, and we'll call it the "mixed-market story" because this narrative promoted the idea that a mixed-market organization of society works best.

But by the late 1970s, public faith in government and public sector approaches had taken a huge hit, with a failed war in Vietnam, three major political assassinations, the Watergate scandal, two humbling oil crises, and an economy marked by stagnant growth yet sharp inflation. This context of disillusionment and crisis set the stage for the "Reagan Revolution," a radical change in the perception of the proper respective roles of government and the private sector (Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Smith, 2012). President Reagan's 1981 inaugural address famously declared that "government *is* the problem," and thus began decades of increasingly market-oriented policymaking in the United States. Over and over again, real or manufactured crises were blamed on the government in general or on specific government programs and institutions, an overarching narrative that I'll simply call the "government-bashing story." Critically, the rhetorical assault on public sector institutions paved the way for weakening, dismantling, or privatizing public sector programs and institutions, accomplished through tax cuts, de-regulation, cuts in social programs, and privatizing many government functions. The market-based assault on and transformation of American public education got underway with the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a report claiming that if another nation had intentionally caused our public schools to be as weak as the ANAR authors claimed they were, then Americans would have viewed that as an act of war. ANAR was just the beginning: For over three decades now, Americans have read and listened to an unending barrage of reports claiming that American public schools are generally failing. That dominant cultural narrative that has sounded like this, with key frames in quotes:

America and Americans are struggling largely because our “failing public schools” are “inefficient government bureaucracies” that are not adequately preparing students with the “marketable job skills” they need “to compete in the global economy,” and this scandalous situation has put our “nation at risk.” We know “our public schools are failing” due to the “poor student achievement” of American pupils on international tests, the unacceptable number of students “not on grade level” or “who need remedial college courses,” and the “skills gaps” among workers and the “shortages of scientists.” “All kids can learn,” but “our public schools are failing” due to “low standards, inefficient government-style bureaucracy, lazy and incompetent teachers, unscientific teaching methods, obstructionist teachers’ unions,” and the “lack of competition, accountability, and school choice.”

Key conceptual frames—brief phrases that Americans have heard or read hundreds or thousands of times, appear in italics in the block quote above. Notice that these frames teach the reader or listener how to view reality—for example, the frame “failing public schools” teaches the listener to associate public education with failure, actually reinforcing the connection between “failure” and “public schools” in the listener’s brain. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the unending “teacher bashing” by market advocates was so relentless and often nasty that a former teacher turned educational activist felt motivated to co-author a book titled *Why is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* (Emery & Ohanian, 2004). In 2004, America’s Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, actually called the nation’s largest teachers’ union (the NEA) “a terrorist organization,” a phrase he later retracted, but which captured the sense of just how aggressively the American business community and sympathetic politicians have attacked American public education. As a subset of the larger government-bashing story, we’ll refer to this general shared narrative claiming that public schools are generally failing as the “failing public schools story.”

To be clear, although Americans showed much more respect for public education in the pre-ANAR era, Americans have always complained about their public schools (Rothstein, 1998), albeit not as vigorously or viciously as became common after 1983. The feeling inside public schools over recent decades is captured by a quote by the late Gerald Bracey: “A war is being waged on America’s public schools. They are under siege.”

With this background on conceptual framing and the changing context of American education, we turn next to analyzing the “failing schools” frame and its effect on educational policy in the United States.

Analyzing the “Failing Public Schools” Framing

The Dramatic Rise of a Deeply Misleading Frame

The first key thing to understand about the various “failing public schools” frames is that they have only become common during the period when business leaders and sympathetic politicians have been vigorously pressing to

re-make American public education according to market-based values and principles. For example, a Google Ngram search of word frequency in books revealed that the term “failing schools” was used over 72 times as frequently in books in 2008 as in 1983, the year when the “A Nation at Risk” report (ANAR) was published. Similarly, “failing public schools” was used 146 times as frequently in 2003—the year the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted—as in 1983. As someone who has spent much of the last decade studying the framing of educational discussion in America, I can report that the American media almost reflexively uses “failing public schools” or “failing schools” as their default language for discussing American education, and the phrase “failing schools” appears with remarkable frequency in the discourse of most American citizens, including even strong supporters of public education.

The second key thing to understand about the various “failing public schools” frames is that they attribute educational failures to the public schools themselves, and thus to teachers also (e.g., Parsons, 2016). Historically, this represents a profound shift in cultural thinking, for in the 1960s, Americans routinely and largely attributed poor educational outcomes to the socio-economic conditions the child was raised in, a tendency strongly reinforced by the findings of the highly-influential Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966). Depending on their political leanings, Americans might have viewed poverty as more or less due to personal failings or conditions in society, but either way, they did not expect teachers and schools to eliminate learning gaps created by social forces as powerful as poverty. Americans believed that the quality of teaching could influence educational outcomes at the margins, but conservatives in particular traditionally expressed profound skepticism that education could provide a substantial boost to life outcomes for children growing up in poverty. But by the early 2000s, those pushing market-oriented educational policies, including CEOs and officials in the second Bush administration, were routinely and vigorously attacking anyone who claimed that poverty was in any way determinative of a child’s educational or life chances. Specifically, president George W. Bush repeatedly decried “the soft bias of low expectations,” and any educators who argued that poorer educational outcomes among children living in poverty were partly or largely due to family SES was attacked for “making excuses.” This represented a radical shift in assigning responsibility for educational outcomes. Given this re-framing of educational causality, citizens, teachers, and other advocates for public education now often argue with one breath that socio-economic factors are the primary drivers of educational inequality (see Robinson & Brandon, 1994), but will later say “low-performing schools,” thus implicitly assigning primary blame for poor education outcomes for poor children to schools and teachers. Finally, it’s worth repeating that schools, districts, and nations do not take the standardized tests that are often used as the basis for these claims of failure, nor do they bear direct responsibility for the disappearing good jobs that are also often blamed on American education (i.e., “skills gaps”). Nevertheless, the “failing schools” framing laid the blame for educational inequality and key economic problems in America directly on public schools and their teachers. After decades of talking about education this way, educators and non-educators alike now routinely talk as if the average test scores of students in a school are a direct proxy for the quality of

the education the school provides, and thus, low test scores are treated as a direct indicator of a “failing school.” It would be difficult to overstate just how powerful a role this shift in language and understanding has played in the rise of market-based educational policies and in the inability of public school educators to regain control of educational policy.

The third key thing to understand about the various “failing public schools” frames is that they directly condition the brain to view public education as a failure. Reinforcing the neural pathways between “failing” or “failure” on the one hand and “public schools” on the other hand means that anytime someone thinks of public schools, they are now more likely to think of failure, and anytime the idea of “failure” is activated in someone’s brain, “public schools” are now more likely to come to mind as one example of failure. This idea that public schools were allegedly failing was further reinforced by frequent repetition of claims that public school teachers were “lazy and incompetent.” This kind of classical conditioning or associationist learning is one of the most elementary and fundamental learning processes (Berk, 2009). While corporations routinely make use of this learning mechanism through celebrity endorsements of their products, market-oriented educational policymakers made use of it through clever framing of educational issues, framing that teaches the brain to believe that standardized tests can be objective (“objective testing”) or that private/charter schools are inherently better than public education (“high-flying charter schools”) or, of course, that public schools are allegedly failing (“failing public schools”). Finally, and critical for the agenda of CEOs and business groups intent on downsizing and privatizing government while expanding the influence of market ideology, the phrase “failing public schools” reinforces the idea that what is failing is a public-sector institution.

The fourth and most critical thing to understand about the various “failing public schools” frames is that at the best, they are deeply misleading, and at the worst, they are dead wrong. There is simply no trustworthy evidence suggesting that America’s public schools are generally failing at their assigned mission, which is largely to pursue higher test scores in schools based largely on the logic of factories (Wheatley, 2015). To be sure, American education could be much better if it were based more on principles of human development and democracy (e.g., Kohn, 1999; Littky, 2004; Little & Ellison, 2015; Meier, 1995; Sahlberg, 2015; Zhao, 2009) rather than the logic of manufacturing, but this point suggests that policymakers have sent teachers on the wrong mission, and the fault for that error rests primarily with policymakers, not public schools or teachers. Next, the indicators usually used as evidence of these so-called failures have been America’s middling ranking on international tests, but there are several problems with using average standardized test scores as indicators of the success of educational systems. Specifically, most of what people say they value most in education is not on standardized tests (Sachs, 1999; Stoddard, 2010) and these tests ignore the majority of academic subjects. Furthermore, average national scores on these international tests are not a good predictor of the future for highly-developed nations such as the United States (Ramirez, et al. 2006), and roughly 80% or more of the variance in test scores is due to out-of-school factors, primarily the socio-economic status of students’ families (Robinson & Brandon, 1994). Significantly the U.S. has the highest or second-highest rates of

both child poverty and inequality among major developed nations. With this confounding variable in mind, a 2009 analysis of 4th-grade reading scores on the 2009 PISA found that if you corrected for America's much higher rate of child poverty by comparing students from under-10% child poverty schools in the United States to the performance of students in nations with under 10% child poverty, those American students' scores would have ranked them #1 in the world (Riddile, 2010). A similar re-analysis of the 2009 4th-grade PISA mathematics scores would have landed American students in under-10% child poverty schools in third place globally in comparison to students from nations with under 10% child poverty. Moreover, judging the effectiveness of American teachers by the average test scores of its students is complicated by the fact that the United States has far more linguistic and cultural diversity than many of the nations whose students achieve higher average scores on these tests. Finally, among major developed nations, only the United States does not have universal healthcare coverage, and untreated medical, dental, and vision problems may also play a role in the performance of a sizable subset of American students.

Thus, there has always been available a great deal of evidence that this narrative of crisis and failure was profoundly misleading, but it continued throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, thus motivating two well-respected educational researchers to author a book tellingly titled *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Since then, educational scholars have published a string of books de-bunking the claim that American public education is generally failing at its assigned mission, books whose titles use unusually strong language such as "myths, lies, hoax" and "the attack on public education" (e.g., Bracey, 2004, 2009; Ravitch, 2013; Rothstein, 1998). However, most Americans don't read such academic books, and there were also plenty of other academic sources and media sources claiming that public schools were in fact failing. Thus, there are two sets of forces that have kept many Americans falsely believing that American public schools are generally failing.

Innocent Confusion or Cynical "Shock Doctrine" Ploy?

Innocent confusion as a motive for the "failing schools" framing. Since the 1980s, I have engaged in literally thousands of discussions and debates about education, both in-person and on-line, and sometimes with individuals who have been influential in educational policymaking. These experiences convinced me that many caring and intelligent Americans are deeply confused about the state of American education. First, many Americans have come to believe that standardized test scores are a true and accurate measurement of student learning and teacher effectiveness, a misleading belief that market-oriented educational policymakers have strongly encouraged (and many may themselves believe). Second, conditions in American public education could be much better, a fact that is largely accounted for by the vast child poverty and economic inequality in America, coupled with the fact that educators have been instructed to organize education largely around the principles of manufacturing, not around what we know about how children develop and learn best. However,

most people are not educators and are too busy to think much about education, and it's simpler to just blame teachers and schools.

Shock doctrine motives for the “failing schools” framing. Over the last half century, politicians worldwide have realized that creating a real crisis or the illusion of a crisis can help them get even highly-unpopular policies enacted, a disturbing process that Naomi Klein reported has been implemented in virtually every field from education to economics to foreign policy (Klein, 2007). Occasionally, educational policymakers have even gotten caught in the act of creating a fictional crisis to serve their policy purposes:

In September, 1995, a video was leaked to the Canadian press of John Snobelen, Ontario's minister of education, telling a closed-door meeting of civil servants that before cuts to education (and other unpopular “reforms”) could be announced, a climate of panic needed to be created by leaking information that painted a more dire picture than he “would be inclined to talk about.” He called it “creating a useful crisis.” (Klein, 2007, p. 326)

Why such urgency to create the illusion of an educational crisis? It's possible that the most important function of the “failing schools” narratives for economic elites was to establish a credible scapegoat for the negative economic and societal consequences of the neoliberal trickle-down economic policies that were established in the United States and elsewhere. Tax cuts, de-regulation, and slashing social programs have had profoundly negative effects for average families in America and other nations where such neoliberal policies were implemented, and unless policymakers had public schools to blame for deteriorating circumstances, it's not clear how they would have explained what caused these problems.

But fictional or not, the narratives that public sector institutions in general and public schools in particular were terrible failures became widely-accepted, largely because wealthy individuals and corporations promoted this message and also established foundations (e.g., Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation) and media outlets (e.g., Fox News, conservative talk radio stations) to relentlessly promote these messages.

As Klein (2007) thoroughly documented, the power of an existing crisis or the illusion of a crisis is that it can scare or disorient people, and make people believe that “business-as-usual” will no longer work, thus enabling policymakers to enact quite radical policy changes that would be vigorously resisted under more normal circumstances. Indeed, this process has been used to enact radical neoliberal economic policies all across the globe, from Chile and Argentina in the 1970s to Bolivia, Poland, and Africa in the 1980s, to Russia and China in the 1990s, and including a steady increase in neoliberal economic and social policies in Europe and the United States. The idea of using a real or manufactured crisis to get market-oriented policies implemented was famously articulated by Milton Friedman, the person most often cited as the godfather of the effort to remake both societies and schools in the image of neoliberal economics:

Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically possible becomes politically inevitable. (Friedman, 1982, p. ix)

Of course, what Friedman meant by “real change” was displacing mixed-market systems with systems run according to the values and logic of unfettered capitalism, an arrangement known variously as “neoliberalism, the Washington consensus, or simply winner-take-all capitalism” (and also winner-take-all politics). Questionable motives and lamentable confusion aside, what are the practical consequences of so many people seeing the issue of American education through the lens of the “failing public schools” frame?

Consequences of the “Failing Public Schools” Framing

The first and most important practical consequence of the relentless framing of public education as a failure is that it profoundly affected the American public’s faith in public education as a national institution. Gallup polls given across the decades reveal that 50-60% of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of faith in public education as an institution in the 1970s, but that number had dropped to 26-32% by 2012-2016 (Gallup Inc., 2017). Leading credence to the theory that this erosion of trust resulted from the concerted effort by the business community to repeatedly frame public education as a failure in the media is that fact that parents who actually have students in public schools have consistently expressed much higher levels of satisfaction with the schools their children attend than they have with “public schools in general” (Gallup Inc., 2017). Thus, the relentless teacher-bashing seems to have convinced many Americans that public schools *in general* must not be doing so well, even though they Americans across the nation simultaneously express quite high levels of satisfaction with the public schools that they actually know about.

The second practical consequence of the “failure” framing of public education is that the resulting loss of faith in teachers and public schools undermined public support for the substantial degree of teacher autonomy that had been commonplace in American education prior to decades of attacks on public education. As a result, teachers’ claims that they should be trusted to make important curricular and assessment decisions have increasingly fallen on deaf ears. Once people believed that public schools are generally “failing” and filled with “lazy and incompetent teachers,” they lost their appetite for allowing teachers freedom and autonomy, and instead wanted someone to tell teachers exactly what to teach exactly how to teach it, and to watch them carefully to make sure they do it, *or else*. This loss of professional autonomy is enormously consequential for teaching as a profession because teacher autonomy has long been cited as one of the most appealing aspects of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1997), but the dramatic erosion of teacher autonomy, coupled with decades of teacher bashing and the toxic climate created by high-stakes testing have made teaching far less attractive as a profession. Thus, despite the relative lack of good

middle class jobs in the United States, shortages of teachers have been increasing in many states.

The third practical consequence of the “failing schools” framing nestled within the larger “government-bashing story” was that it opened the door for the private sector to claim that public education should be run more like a business. After all, if “government is the problem,” public sector institutions are inherently “inefficient bureaucracies,” and “failing public schools” merely reflect the inherent inferiority of public sector approaches, then where else can people turn for solutions—other than the private sector? This playbook of creating a crisis and then proposing radical market solutions had been utilized all over the globe by market advocates seeking to re-make democratic nations in the image of winner-take-all capitalism, but how did this dynamic unfold in American educational policy? The self-styled “educational reformers”—a group dominated by CEOs, wealthy individuals, and business organizations such as The Business Roundtable (Emery & Ohanian, 2004)—declared with enormous confidence that what American education needed was a much more market-based approach. Those claims sounded like this:

“Everything works better if you run it more like a business,” and “education is just like any other business,” so to fix “failing public schools,” we must “run them more like a business.” That means setting “higher standards”; focusing on “rigorous academics” and “a common core of measurable student outcomes” all aimed at “developing marketable job skills” so that our students can better “compete in the global economy.” Teachers must use “evidence-based practices” and we should “measure student achievement” using “objective tests.” To motivate teachers and students, we need to “incentivize excellence” using “value-added measurements” of teacher effectiveness and “hold everyone more accountable” for results. Overall, we need “market-based solutions” emphasizing “standardization, efficiency, competition,” and “school choice.” And don’t claim that your students’ test scores are lower just because your students are poor: “Poverty is just an excuse” and we don’t accept any excuses.

We’ll call this story the “market-based solutions story,” and once again, the phrases or conceptual frames that Americans have heard countless times in recent decades appear in quotations above. To reiterate, hearing and saying such phrases repeatedly literally re-wires our brains so that the market-based-solutions story becomes dominant in our minds and the mixed-market story fades away through lack of use.

In terms of conceptual consequences, the dramatic rise of the government-bashing story and the market-based solutions story has meant that many Americans seem only able to conceive as government as a problem and believe all solutions come from market-based thinking. As it has now been 36 years since President Reagan declared that “government” is the problem, America now has more than an entire generation of citizens who have been raised entirely in a society that has rarely spoken the mixed-market story but

instead regularly repeats the government-bashing narrative and the market-based-solutions narrative.

As for practical consequences, the ascendance of market-based thinking has had profound and revolutionary consequences for American education. Americans have traditionally thought of education as being about developing well-rounded individuals, wise and active citizens, and ethical and competent workers, but the market takeover of public education largely narrowed the explicit focus of education to being about developing marketable job skills to better compete in the global economy. Even kindergarten teachers are now expected to document how they are preparing five- and six-year-olds for “college and career readiness.” In turn, this increasingly narrow focus on marketable job skills has led to profound neglect of social studies (history, economics, psychology, sociology, government, etc.), literature, health and physical education, and the arts. Like a factory trying to boost daily output, these market-based policies focus on rapidly boosting testable outcomes in reading, mathematics, and science, and this has led to increased use of long blocks of direct instruction—methods that do boost test scores faster in the short run but that also undermine intrinsic motivation, cause faster forgetting and more behavioral problems, and generally seem less effective overall in the long run (Wheatley, 2015a, 2015b). Lost in this process are broadly superior teaching methods such as play and project-based learning—transdisciplinary methods that are connected to real life and that are more effective in the long run for the whole child and whole curriculum but that do not as rapidly boost test scores in the short run. The narrowed curricular focus, loss of trust in teachers, and rise of business ideas such as standardization and alignment led to the widespread disappearance of creative and locally-developed curricula coupled with far greater use of highly-profitable commercial curriculum packages aligned with commercial high-stakes tests. Because everything often seems to revolve around test scores in this context of test-based accountability, teachers, especially in high-poverty districts, feel enormous pressure to raise students’ test scores, especially because there are often harsh consequences for failing to do so. Most educators see test-based judgments of teacher effectiveness as misleading at best or flatly unscientific and fraudulent at the worst, but most feel powerless to change the system. Not surprisingly, teachers and students alike often feel burned out or alienated by the toxic stress created by market-oriented policies centered on test-based accountability:

People who haven't darkened the door of a public school in decades have no idea how “accountability” has robbed those institutions of vitality, of zest, and of the intangible elements that make children want to succeed. There's only so much brow-beating, only so much drilling, only so many test-prep worksheets a small mind can endure without zoning out. Later, when the option is availed, that uninspired child will drop out.

—John Young, Waco Tribune, 10/23/05

While these market-oriented policies have not created any meaningful improvements in even long-term test score outcomes, multiple book-length accounts have been published on the wide range of collateral damage these

policies have caused for students, teachers, and society (e.g., Bracey, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2009; Ravitch, 2010, 2013; also see Wheatley, 2015a).

Discussion and Implications

What's most striking about the findings above is that a series of profound psychological and practical ripple effects were set in motion across an entire nation simply by assigning primary blame for America's educational and social problems to government in general and public education in particular. That framing, carefully conditioned into the minds of hundreds of millions of Americans over time, allowed for the market takeover of public education (and much of society). If we still doubt the power of frames and stories for shaping policy and the destiny of nations, let's imagine how American education policy might have played out if the following story and frames were how most Americans had understood reality starting in the late 1990s:

"Failed market ideology" is the main cause of the most serious social and educational problems facing America. The extension of the "unhealthy priorities" of market-based thinking to the broader society has created "higher levels of poverty" and "increasing inequality," which in turn have caused a "vast array of social dysfunctions," including "struggling families, a disappearing middle class, vast educational inequality, increasingly corrupt and dysfunctional governments," and "accelerating environmental destruction." "Market ideology has failed repeatedly" for achieving the broader goals we have for people and the planet, and has backfired badly in public education. "Education is a unique profession," profoundly different than manufacturing or for-profit business, and "educators are everyday heroes" who require substantial "freedom and autonomy" in order to teach effectively.

We can debate the best wording of such a statement or debate the degree to which the problems described therein are fully attributable to market-based thinking and neoliberal policies or are partly due to other factors. However, there is no debating the fact that if Americans understood their current situation in light of that story and those kinds of frames, that would lead to very different policies and practices than came about after America education was framed in terms of the government-bashing, failing schools, and market-based-solutions stories. Language matters, and the way we frame educational debates can have profound implications for which policies and practices seem sensible and which seem unthinkable. More specifically, while frames such as "measurable objectives, objective testing, student achievement, value-added assessment, greater accountability, merit pay, and school choice" all frame our thinking about education in ways that have an array of negative consequences (Wheatley, 2009, 2015), it is the framing of public schools as failures that created the possibility for market-based ideology to largely take over American public education.

Given that the "failing public schools" framing is both deeply misleading and inevitably creates various negative consequences, how might American educators and citizens more constructively frame educational debates? The

insights from cognitive neuroscience can help guide us in these reframing efforts.

- 1) One should never use the language that was designed to promote the policies you oppose, in this case, frames that associate public education with failure or that attribute student outcomes wholly to the performance of schools themselves. That's right, the recommendation of Lakoff (2014) and others is to try to never speak or write those frames, unless you must mention them to in a critique or use them to establish a shared frame of reference with others.
- 2) One should develop concise frames and phrases to challenge and replace the ideas and frames that you oppose. For example, one can discuss educational inequality as primarily resulting from a "failing market ideology" or "failing economy" that creates vast inequality across the board. And we might talk about "America's remarkably successful public schools," a framing that will surprise many listeners but that is fair given how American schools have performed despite facing much tougher challenges than those found in other major developed nations. These frames should be used and repeated frequently and whenever possible, because frequent repetition plays a critical role in establishing new frames in listeners' brains.
- 3) Develop concise frames and phrases to establish the seed ideas, values, principles, and practices you consider most beneficial. Thus, those supporting strong public education with substantial teacher autonomy and progressive educational practices might promote the idea that "education is a unique profession," that "public education is a national treasure" like our national parks or interstate highway system, that "teachers are everyday heroes," and that we want and need "healthy motivations" for teachers and students alike, and that all this will require more "freedom and autonomy" for teachers and learners. To establish these frames in people's brains, people should use these phrases whenever they get the opportunity, and repeat these phrases over and over again.
- 4) People should be ready with facts and examples to back up this new way of talking about education. For example, the finding that fourth-graders in under-10% child poverty schools in America would have been #1 in the world in reading scores among nations with under 10% child poverty directly contradicts the narrative of general failure for U.S. schools. However, in terms of effective persuasion, it is usually more effective to start with compelling stories and concise reframing anchored in one's moral values, not with vague paragraphs or minor details of research findings.
- 5) Understand that it takes hard work and effort across years to establish a shared cultural understanding that will then allow you to

use short phrases and frames and everyone will know exactly what you mean (Lakoff, 2014).

The late Robin Williams remarked that “No matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world.” In this article, we have explored how one powerful way of framing the situation in American schools (and society) has enabled a profoundly destructive market-based takeover of American K-12 public education. The path to taking back American public education requires us to apply the same framing principles and strategies that were used as a weapon against American public schools and their teachers. However, this time, we should use those framing principles and strategies to promote a more accurate narrative aimed at the goals we value most for people and the planet, and anchored in principles of healthy human development and democracy.

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