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# Teacher Blame as the Grammar of Public School Reform

Diana D'Amico Pawlewicz\* 

College of Education & Human Development, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND

\*Corresponding author. Email: [diana.pawlewicz@und.edu](mailto:diana.pawlewicz@und.edu)

## Abstract

Historical policy stories that situate teachers as the root cause of problems in public schools have long accompanied educational reforms, including No Child Left Behind. This article portrays the history of teacher blame as a defining component of the grammar of American educational reform. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformers identified teacher quality—a later trademark of NCLB—as a panacea for school improvement, but it remained an amorphous idea bound up in gendered and racialized assumptions. The historical results were a swirl of policies that increased standardization across the schools. This article concludes that teacher blame was a critical driver for federal intervention in local public education, and that the roots of that intervention extend far deeper than historians have allowed.

**Keywords:** education policy; teacher reform; No Child Left Behind; teacher quality

*The assertion that “the teacher makes the school,” trite though it be, is nevertheless so true that in any inquiry as to the quality of the country schools we should seek first to ascertain the character of the teaching force.<sup>1</sup>*

—John Eaton, US commissioner of education, 1881

*What we are learning is that the urgency to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers to prepare today’s students—all students—for the future is fundamentally intertwined with the competitiveness and security of the nation.<sup>2</sup>*

—Rod Paige, US secretary of education, 2004

More than 120 years separated these statements by US commissioner of education John Eaton and US secretary of education Rod Paige. Eaton witnessed the rise and spread of public education beyond its mid-nineteenth-century roots, and Paige

<sup>1</sup>“Report of the Commissioner of Education,” in *Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, vol. 3 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office [hereafter GPO], 1881), xxi. United States Office of Education, *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1879* (Washington DC: GPO, 1881), xxi.

<sup>2</sup>US Department of Education, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge: The Secretary’s Third Annual Report on Teacher Quality* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2004), 1.

oversaw the No Child Left Behind law that has, for better or worse, become a hallmark of twenty-first-century public education in the US. In the years that divided the two men were wars, social changes, economic transformations, political upheavals, and fights for justice. And yet, for Eaton and Paige, as for many policymakers and politicians who came after and before them, both the problem plaguing the nation's public schools and the pathway to improvement were the same: teachers.

As public school systems developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, so too did a series of interconnected policy stories that have shaped American public education. Reformers have come and gone, but this narrative—this way of defining school problems and attempting to solve them—has outlived them all. The first story starts here: *society is in trouble*. The exact reason why society is struggling is largely unimportant; historically, the perceived threat has come variously from rising numbers of immigrants, growing poverty, foreign wars, economic downturns, and flagging international competition. Regardless, this leads to the second essential policy story: *public schools are social salves*. The concept of public education was hardly a new idea in the mid-1800s. Instead, it was a very old and unpopular idea. Notable figures like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin had long touted the societal and individual benefits of a free education, but critics' concerns of big government and overtaxation drowned them out.<sup>3</sup> As German and Irish immigrants arrived on American shores, public education transformed from ideological flash-point into a tool for social reform.

As I describe in my book *Blaming Teachers: Professionalization Policies and the Failure of Reform in American History*, American public education has always been beset by mixed emotions. On the one hand, reformers hoped that public schools could buoy communities. But on the other hand, they also expressed frustration that public schools were falling short of their lofty mission. It is precisely this potent mixture of hopefulness and exasperation that gave way to the third critical policy story: *teachers are to blame*. Just like Eaton and Paige, generations of pundits, politicians, and policymakers looked from the public schools and communities they were intended to serve past social inequality, past overcrowded and under-resourced schools, directly to teachers.

No policy story is more central to American public education reform—told and retold time and again. The narrative unfolds something like this: teachers are the hope and saviors of public schools and the communities they serve; but, too often, many teachers are not up to that challenge, whether because of negligence or greed or ineptitude. Viewed in this light, teachers are the root cause of any range of problems plaguing the public schools. In this formulation, teachers—a monolithic group—are responsible for the success or failure of a system in which they have little autonomy and control. Historically, teachers sit at the nexus of policy optimism and cynicism: they are at once the pathway to public school success and also the reason

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<sup>3</sup>Diana D'Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers: Professionalization Policies and the Failure of Reform in American History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 16–42; Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993). For the formation of common schools, see Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

public schools have fallen short, no matter the measure. This, in turn, leads us directly to the final policy story: *better teachers will lead to better schools and communities*.

This rhetoric of blame is the lens through which the problems of public education have been viewed, defined, and addressed from the earliest days of municipally supported school systems to the present.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, teachers have not been the *only* target of criticism when it comes to the public schools. Indeed, everything from who should be taught and how, to the materials and measures of instruction have been ensnared in varying degrees of debate. But these matters, and many others, were not separate from teacher blame; instead, they were part of it.

Take, for instance, debates over the mathematics curriculum in the mid-1950s. As the Cold War heated up, elected leaders and pundits fretted that there were not enough engineers and scientists to safeguard the nation's security—*society is in trouble*. The Carnegie Foundation gave \$21,000 to the Educational Testing Service of Princeton to explore the state of mathematics in sixty classrooms in five states—*public schools are social salves*. But the findings of the final report only confirmed and escalated fears. “The teaching of mathematics is in a deplorable state,” Benjamin Fine, the *New York Times* education reporter, alerted readers in 1956. The mathematics curriculum was “outmoded and must be brought up to date.” According to the study's report, “the high school curriculum today shows few, if any, signs of the important developments that have taken place in mathematical science since the seventeenth century.” But, according to the researchers, there was an even more important problem: the teachers, few of whom were “competent,” were often “confused” and “unable to teach the subject”—*teachers are to blame*. Indeed, a more engaging curriculum would be required, and something would have to be done about the unwieldy class sizes (many of the teachers in the study instructed groups of thirty-five to forty students of varying ability). But first, something had to be done about the teachers who, collectively, “have a hard time keeping even half a jump ahead of their students,” the final report explained—*better teachers will lead to better schools and communities*.<sup>5</sup>

Blaming teachers is neither historically random nor accidental. Rather, blaming teachers—and the resultant reforms—is a quasi-logical outgrowth of the policy stories that precede it, and it serves a functional purpose. When policymakers target teachers as the problem, they are at once responding to claims that the schools have in some way fallen short and offering up a politically palatable reform that leaves the core structures and organizations of the schools and communities they serve intact. In this formulation, it is teachers that are the problems, not social or institutional inequality, not inadequate funding, not any range of issues that would necessitate fundamental, structural change. Taken together, these four interlocking policy stories have shaped the nature of American public education and left teachers adrift in a sea of unrelenting reform. From these policy stories has come the historical infatuation with teacher quality. Historically, teacher blame has served as the rallying cry of

<sup>4</sup>Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); David A. Rochefort and Roger W. Cobb, eds., *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); D'Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers*.

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin Fine, “Teachers Chided on Mathematics,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1956, 1.

education policy and the engine of school reform. Of course, this historical continuity is rarely transparent. For one, there is little enthusiasm for the rejuvenation of an old, failed plan. But perhaps even more aptly, teacher blame has become so inextricable from how we make sense of American schools, past and present, that it often escapes unquestioned, unanalyzed as the social creation it is. Just as textbooks, graded classrooms, standardized tests, and desks in rows are the grammar of schooling and have shaped the nature of instruction, blaming teachers is the grammar of school reform and has shaped the ways schools are understood and perceived.

It is therefore not surprising that when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) emerged, its advocates drew on a long rhetorical history of blaming teachers. Even as there are various noteworthy aspects of the legislation, including the focus on outputs and consequences rather than funding incentives and the explicit discussion of choice and privatization, NCLB was at its core a teacher reform initiative. One essential question this twentieth-anniversary special issues asks is, Was the legislation a historical departure or continuity? Once viewed from the vantage point of the history of teacher policy, NCLB transforms from a novel or bold experiment into a somewhat unsurprising and predictable next phase in the history of American public education.

This article begins with a discussion of the history of teacher blame as a defining component of the grammar of educational reform, the lens through which problems have been defined and solutions envisioned. Blaming teachers, of course, was far more than heated rhetoric. Instead, those historic discourses gave way to specific policies. Across the historical arc of American public education, teacher reforms, propelled by policy stories grounded in teacher blame, have been a mechanism for systemization and rationalization, ways to bolster the bureaucratic order of public education by teacher-proofing the schools. Even as reformers identified teacher quality, the trademark of NCLB, as a panacea for school improvement, it remained an amorphous idea bound up in gendered and racialized assumptions, as the next section of this article explores. Fitting hand to glove with historical calls for quality were questions of what exactly “teacher quality” meant and how it could be measured. The historical results were a swirl of policies that created confusion and distrust among teachers and increased standardization across the schools.

If NCLB is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, if it is just a next chapter in the history of teacher blame, then perhaps the role of the federal government in local public schooling that the legislation secured was new, or at least a break from the past. Scholars have explored the gradual creep of the federal government, often turning to the mid-1960s and the authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as a critical moment of genesis. But, once again, if we consider the role of the federal government in public education from the vantage point of the history of teacher reform, what becomes apparent is not only that teacher blame was a critical driver for federal education reform, but also that the roots of the federal role in local public education extend far deeper than historians have allowed.

Though NCLB has caused much hand-wringing since it was implemented in 2002, it did not place teachers in their iron cage.<sup>6</sup> They were already in one. Instead, NCLB

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<sup>6</sup>John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, “Institutional Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony,” *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (Sept. 1977), 340–63; Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter

simply fortified the bars with twenty-first-century materials: accountability metrics, a focus on outputs, public reporting coupled with punitive measures, an assertive role for the federal government. American school reform is inextricable from teacher blame. The policy impulse to blame teachers bolstered the bureaucratic order of public schooling, and the bureaucratic order of public schooling is the lifeblood of the policy impulse to blame teachers. As public school systems developed in the mid-nineteenth century, so did the bureaucratic order that has come to shape modern public education. Gendered assumptions legitimized a hierarchical structure that placed teachers on the lowest rungs; with limited voice and authority, teachers were easy targets. Within this framework, teacher improvement centered on supervision and regulation; in short: bureaucracy.

The goal of the historian is not merely to chronicle and recount; rather, there is a power to the past. This article considers how we might use the history of teacher blame to reconsider and disrupt some of the ways we have come to understand the public schools, the challenges they face, and how they may be improved—in short, to chart a new course for American public schools.

### Teacher Blame as the Grammar of Public School Reform

In their classic article, David Tyack and William Tobin defined the grammar of schooling as the “regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction.” As they explained, “the grammar of schooling has become so well established that it is typically taken for granted as just the way schools are.” Alongside the grammar of schooling that shaped instruction has been the grammar of school reform that shaped the nature of education policy and the essential structures of the nation’s public schools. Bureaucratic efficiency and standardization are key byproducts of the grammar of reform, and the engine propelling their creation and maintenance are policy stories rooted in blaming teachers.<sup>7</sup>

No sooner had public school systems cropped up than critics began to bemoan their failure. In 1888, the National Teachers Association held its annual meeting in San Francisco to discuss “Current Criticism of the Public School System, and What Answer.” As participants recounted, local schools around the county faced reproach for everything from failing to cultivate morality to not imparting adequate subject matter mastery. Though the nature of the critiques varied, one theme was consistent: the public was disappointed with their schools.<sup>8</sup> Similar concerns about school failure reverberated from one generation to the next and were shared by parents, policymakers, and politicians.

By the 1930s, much had changed in the nation’s public schools. Child labor laws and immigration increased the size and diversity of schools across the country. And the study of education became firmly implanted in colleges and universities from

W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (April 1983), 147–60.

<sup>7</sup>David Tyack and William Tobin, “The ‘Grammar’ of Schooling: Why Has It Been so Hard to Change?,” *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (Sept. 21, 1994), 454, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312031003453>

<sup>8</sup>“Current Criticism of the Public School System,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1888.

coast to coast, giving rise to an administrative class of reformers and leading to standardized curricula and testing. And yet, many of the same criticisms and worries persisted. Writing under the pseudonym of "A Mere Parent," one author explained, "I have a boy 15 years old, now closing his second year of high school. As far as I can ascertain, not only has he not acquired anything of practical value, but he has actually retrogressed during the high school period."<sup>9</sup>

As the Second World War came to a close, deep-seated fears of nuclear warfare converged with population growth and demographic shifts to send people back once more to the public schools in the hope that they could serve as social salves by enhancing the country's competitiveness internationally and supporting the fight for equality domestically. In spite of this new context of public schooling, similar concerns about failing schools persisted. In 1947, one business group joined the fray and argued that because of the focus on "personality enrichment and the activity programs," public schools were not only falling short of their mission but putting the "future of the English language" in jeopardy.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, by the early 1960s, Oliver J. Caldwell, assistant US commissioner of international education, offered that "American education has failed quite miserably and continues to fail."<sup>11</sup>

By the 1980s, a new conservatism spread across the country, but the New Right echoed the same tropes about public school failure that shaped the contours of earlier eras. President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education warned, "Our nation is at risk." Why? One need look no further than the country's schools, where "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity."<sup>12</sup> In 1993, another federal study warned of a "quiet crisis": "The nation is failing its smartest students, who sit bored and unchallenged in classrooms and ultimately learn less than their counterparts around the world."<sup>13</sup> This same vision of failing schools laid the groundwork for No Child Left Behind. Calling for character education and accountability while on the campaign trail, George W. Bush warned of the "diminished hopes of our current [education] system" and promised that, if elected, he would turn things around.<sup>14</sup>

Coupled with the gnashing of teeth over public school failure has been a striking consensus around the root causes of the nation's educational inadequacy—a consensus that has endured in spite of significant political, social, and educational change. "If teachers will but strive to lay aside antiquated notions, and adapt the light of experience to the new ways opening before them," one critic hoped in 1852, "the world will be all the better for it."<sup>15</sup> In 1912, even as the average age of teachers increased and more teachers received some degree of advanced preparation, the *Atlanta*

<sup>9</sup>A Mere Parent, "Are High Schools Failing?," *New York Times*, March 3, 1930, 12.

<sup>10</sup>"Business Groups Censures Public Schools As Failing to Teach Rudiments of English," *New York Times*, April 15, 1947, 27.

<sup>11</sup>"Schools of U.S. Seen Failing in Basic Job," *New York Times*, March 28, 1961, 28.

<sup>12</sup>National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: GPO, April 1983).

<sup>13</sup>Lynda Richardson, "Public Schools Are Failing Brightest Students, a Federal Study Says," *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 1993, 23.

<sup>14</sup>"Full Text of Bush's Campaign Speech on Education," *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1999.

<sup>15</sup>"Teachers and Teaching," *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1852, 2.

*Constitution* warned readers that “glaring inefficiencies” characterized the public schools. The cause? “Bad teachers.”<sup>16</sup> By the second half of the twentieth century, districts around the country implemented certification and licensure standards for teachers, requiring a college degree and additional examination. And yet, in 1968, Peter Drucker, the management theorist, echoed the same concerns as his predecessors:

Teaching is the only major occupation of man for which we have not yet developed tools that make an average person capable of competence and performance. In teaching, we rely on the “naturals,” the ones who somehow know how to teach. . . . Indeed there are many great people around who in twelve or sixteen years of school have not had the benefit of a single good teacher. The further along we go in school, the rarer are good teachers and the drearier, as a rule, is the learning experience.<sup>17</sup>

Echoing Drucker’s criticisms, former pupils chimed in on a panel sponsored by the US Office of Education. “Every day I went to school,” one explained, “but there was nothing I really learned.” According to Marion Barry, a civil rights activist who would later become mayor of the District of Columbia, the cause was clear: “The teachers’ attitude is bad.”<sup>18</sup> In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reported, “Our schools’ most closely held secret amounts to a great national shame: Without telling parents they are doing so, many districts hire unqualified people as ‘teachers.’”<sup>19</sup> This very formulation of teacher as both problem and lever of change served as the lens through which the creators of NCLB understood school problems and sought to repair them. According to Rod Paige, “This nation has many great teachers, but not nearly enough.”<sup>20</sup> In 2004, the Teaching Commission, a group established by Louis V. Gerstner Jr., former chair of IBM, released *Teaching at Risk* and warned, “Nothing is more vital to our future than ensuring that we attract and retain the best teachers in our public schools. . . . It is time to raise the bar for teachers,” ignoring the fact that the bar for teachers had been steadily rising for more than a century already.<sup>21</sup>

The deep, unwavering, and historical consensus that teachers were both the cause of school failure and the pathway to school improvement has been a defining principle of American public education and is inseparable from the gendered dynamics of the workforce.<sup>22</sup> Horace Mann envisioned publicly funded schools as “the grand

<sup>16</sup>“Bad Teachers, and Why,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 29, 1912.

<sup>17</sup>Peter Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 1992), 338.

<sup>18</sup>Ellen Hoffman, “Ex-Pupils Give Teachers Bad Marks,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 1968.

<sup>19</sup>National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future. Report of the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future* (New York: National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996), 14.

<sup>20</sup>US Department of Education, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, iii.

<sup>21</sup>The Teaching Commission, *Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action* (New York: The Teaching Commission, 2004), 10, 21.

<sup>22</sup>Myra H. Strober and David Tyack, “Why Do Women Teach and Men Manage? A Report on Research on Schools,” *Signs* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980), 494–503; Nancy Hoffman, *Woman’s “True” Profession: Voices*



machinery by which the 'raw material' of human nature can be worked up into inventors and discoverers." These new institutions, he promised, could serve as "the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery."<sup>23</sup> Mann, like many of his contemporaries, drew upon gendered notions of women as innately nurturing and docile to argue that they were uniquely primed to serve as teachers. But, he argued, there were limits to a woman's role in the schools: while she may be aptly suited to teach the young, she was not fit to make decisions or lead. "As a general law," Mann explained in 1853, "the man surpasses the woman in . . . intellectual facilities. . . but the woman surpasses the man in beauty."<sup>24</sup> Similar gendered assumptions and norms would shape female teachers' work lives over the ensuing decades, giving way to policies and practices that isolated women to their classrooms and deprived them of professional authority and voice.<sup>25</sup>

Some sociologists have defined professionalism through a functionalist framework where factors like expertise, authority, and autonomy categorically differentiate professional occupations from non-professional ones.<sup>26</sup> Historians, however, have complicated these taxonomies by offering vivid accounts of the social dimensions of professional identity and chronicling the ways gender, race, and class have shaped who qualifies as a professional and who does not.<sup>27</sup> As occupations like medicine and law developed in America during the nineteenth century, objectivity and rationality surfaced as core attributes of this new professional class of experts. But these were gendered and raced concepts that implicitly made professional work the province of White men. As school leaders and policymakers looked to the growing legions of women who served as teachers, instead of a professional class of experts they saw workers who would need careful guidance and supervision under the tutelage of other professionals: male school leaders.

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*from the History of Teaching*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003); Geraldine Jonchik Clifford, "Man/Woman/Teacher: Gender, Family, and Career in American Educational History," in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, ed. Donald R. Warren (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 293–343.

<sup>23</sup>Lawrence A. Cremin, ed., *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), 79, 87.

<sup>24</sup>Horace Mann, *A Few Thoughts on the Powers and Duties of Woman: Two Lectures* (Syracuse, NY: Hall, Mills, and Company, 1853), 23.

<sup>25</sup>For more on the gendered dynamics of school teaching, see Jackie M. Blount, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005); Myra H. Strober and David Tyack, "Why Do Women Teach and Men Manage?"; Patricia Anne Carter, *Everybody's Paid but the Teacher: The Teaching Profession and the Women's Movement* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup>Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism Reborn: Theory, Prophecy, and Policy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup>Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976); Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979); Nel Noddings, "Feminist Critiques in the Professions," *Review of Research in Education* 16 (1990), 393–424, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1167357>; Anne Witz, "Patriarchy and Professions: The Gendered Politics of Occupational Closure," *Sociology* 24, no. 4 (Nov. 1990), 675–90.



By the late nineteenth century, school reformers like Joseph Mayer Rice looked at the young women filling classrooms in growing public school systems and reasoned that the key barrier to school improvement was the corps' collective "professional incompetency." The essential dilemma for Rice in the late 1800s and other reformers who would follow centered on number as well as gender: the nation's public schools needed a lot of teachers, more than, in his estimation, "are born for the profession." In 1920, the Committee on Industrial Education of the National Association of Manufacturers reported that "the overwhelming predominance of women teachers in the schools of the United States is strongly condemned among the many grievances against our educational system."<sup>28</sup> The solution centered on bureaucracy. As Rice explained, "As a rule, our teachers are too weak to stand alone, and need consequently to be propped up by the supervisory staff."<sup>29</sup> An administrative hierarchy, he reasoned, could solve many school dilemmas because "the teacher is supposed to be wiser than the child, the principal than the teacher, and the superintendent than the principal."<sup>30</sup> And the administrative hierarchy that developed in schools around the country was a gendered one. According to the superintendent of schools in Davenport, Iowa, men had "greater executive ability"; "every school with grammar-grade boys," he argued, "should have a male principal." In Kansas City, the superintendent there made the case for male school leaders by maintaining that "while women are prompt and conscientious . . . they know little of the outside world."<sup>31</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the teacher-student ratio in big cities like New York soared to 1:50. By the close of the nineteenth century, while class sizes remained large, the teacher-administrator ratio was close to 1:13. As one commentator noted, the "elaborate school systems . . . set a thousand machine-moved teachers in the schools." Even as American education reformers like Rice wished for professional teachers and offered reforms in the name of professionalization, the results were workspaces and school systems that inhibited professional authority.<sup>32</sup> Reflecting on the organization and functioning of the school, one school leader explained in 1940 that "the child's welfare is wholly dependent on the teacher."<sup>33</sup> But with each initiative, teachers found themselves increasingly isolated to their classrooms, scrutinized, and managed, often by male administrators. With each reform initiative, the rationalization of the school bureaucracy expanded.

<sup>28</sup>"Shop Censures School," *New York Times*, May 30, 1920, 10.

<sup>29</sup>Joseph Mayer Rice, "Our Public-School System: Evils in Baltimore," *The Forum*, Oct. 1892, 151, unz.org. Also see D'Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers*, 50.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph Mayer Rice, *Scientific Management in Education* (New York: Hinds, Noble and Eldredge, 1912), xii.

<sup>31</sup>"Male or Female Principals," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 28, 1890, 4.

<sup>32</sup>D'Amico Pawlewicz, *Blaming Teachers*, 41. For more on the profession, see Freidson, *Professionalism Reborn*; Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions*; Witz, "Patriarchy and Professions"; JoAnne Brown, *The Definition of a Profession: The Authority of Metaphor in the History of Intelligence Testing, 1890-1930* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>33</sup>Agness Boysen, "The Principal and the Teacher," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 20, 1940.

## The Elusive Quest for Teacher Quality

That better teachers would lead to better schools has been the central logic of American education reform. Historically, policymakers have concurred that increased teacher quality would produce correlated increases in educational outcomes for students. “Obviously,” Ervin Eugene Lewis, the superintendent of schools in Flint, Michigan, reflected in 1925, “the best way to improve a school system is to improve the teaching staff.”<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that teachers have not benefited from improved training throughout history. During the early nineteenth century, a shortage of teachers in some areas led some communities to offer teaching positions in common schools to individuals with little experience. Reforms leading to the establishment of teacher-training institutions helped to better prepare the nation’s teachers.<sup>35</sup> However, not only has the idea of teacher quality shifted over time, reflecting broader social needs and anxieties, but within historical moments education reformers, school leaders, and teachers have been largely unable to reach consensus in their definitions of teacher quality. Since the rise of municipal public school systems, over the twentieth century, and into the present, school leaders and social commentators have simultaneously called for better teachers and struggled to define the attributes associated with teacher quality. As a result, the quest to increase teacher quality has been an ever-present goal of school reform and an enigma.

In 1936, school leaders in Philadelphia compiled a list of attributes possessed by the “ideal teacher.” Not only was “good health” necessary, but so too was “intelligence sufficient to grasp the abstract.” “Emotional control” was critical, as was “good breeding.” The ideal teacher had both a “pleasant voice” and the “ability to make friends.” “Sense of humor” was important, too, as was the capacity for continued growth.<sup>36</sup> In 1948, educators gathered in Bowling Green, Ohio, to take up a similar question: “What makes a good teacher?” Under the leadership of university faculty members and state education leaders, conference attendees generated a list of lofty attributes that included love of children and patience, emotional stability, curiosity, a pleasing personality and appearance, a healthy physical and mental outlook, and an ability to keep abreast of educational trends, among others features.<sup>37</sup>

Over time and across the United States, school leaders agreed about the broad contours of the list but debated how to cultivate those characteristics as well as how to measure them. Perhaps maturity was a factor, some wondered. If so, the minimum teaching age should be raised. Or maybe it was not age but comportment, and thus more stringent rules around social conduct were necessary. Perhaps, instead, quality was not innate but learned and, if so, more training ought to be required. The result was a cacophony of reforms. Minimum age requirements increased; so too did required time in normal schools, colleges, and universities. In addition,

<sup>34</sup>Ervin Eugene Lewis, *Personnel Problems of the Teaching Staff: A Study of Some of the Outstanding Personnel Management Problems That Arise in the Administration and Supervision of a Public School System* (New York: The Century Co., 1925), 3.

<sup>35</sup>Christine A. Ogren, *The American State Normal School: An Instrument of Great Good* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>36</sup>“Way to Aid Youth Called Big Need As Teachers Meet,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 28, 1936, 2.

<sup>37</sup>Benjamin Fine, “Qualities Listed of Good Teachers,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1948, 13.

teachers found themselves evaluated by their superiors on personal appearance traits including height, weight, make-up, hairstyle, and clothing.<sup>38</sup> In the end, teachers faced an array of new rules and regulations, and school leaders were unable to decipher if quality had been improved in any discernible way. Iterations of this same story played out time and again.

Beyond confusion and frustration, reforms in the name of teacher quality also gave way to mounting distrust between teachers and school leaders, the former doubting that the latter could fairly evaluate their performance. Education reformers in Gary, Indiana, and St. Paul, Minnesota, called for merit pay in the 1920s as a way to improve teacher quality by incentivizing teachers to perform better—in the estimation of their supervisors. Those plans fizzled within a few years but resurfaced again after World War II, when perennial concerns about quality were compounded by teacher shortages. Too many teachers had grown lazy, according to critics. Merit pay plans, district leaders enthusiastically proposed, would enliven them. In the late 1950s, one school administrator in Fullerton, California, explained, “I firmly believe that such a [merit] plan will motivate the teacher to do an even better job in the classroom.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time, school leaders reasoned that many people did not consider teaching as a career because of low salary scales and suggested that competitive remuneration plans could entice others to the schools. Merit pay plans, even as they were unpopular, could increase the earning potential of teachers and “be an aid to recruitment.”<sup>40</sup> From these vantage points, merit pay seemed like a silver bullet for increasing teacher quality.

But despite the enthusiasm from school leaders, policymakers, and many university researchers, organized teachers vehemently protested the proposed plans. In 1958, the American Federation of Teachers under the leadership of Mary Herrick, the director of the research department, published *Merit Rating: Dangerous Mirage or Master Plan*, which synthesized more than a decade of opposition. For Herrick and the AFT leadership, there were three broad, fundamental, and catastrophic problems with the plans. The first and perhaps most insurmountable criticism that organized teachers levied at merit pay plans revolved around trust: they just did not believe school administrators could be impartial. Additionally, organized teachers pointed out that there was simply no consensus around what constituted good teaching. “The teacher is to be creative and adventurous, talkative, vivacious and witty, and at the same time sober, reserved, and modest,” Herrick explained. Beyond whether such attributes could be embodied in one person, the final fatal issue teachers raised regarding merit plans centered on professional autonomy: did the list of traits have any real bearing on one’s ability to teach? Instead, Herrick noted, “the characteristic given most emphasis in merit rating systems is clearly the ability to please the school administration.” Such plans wouldn’t enhance teacher professionalism, she warned,

<sup>38</sup>Jonna Perrillo, “Beyond ‘Progressive’ Reform: Bodies, Discipline, and the Construction of the Professional Teacher in Interwar America,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Fall 2004), 337–63; Kate Rousmaniere, *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup>“Trustee Wants Teacher Pay Based on Merit,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 19, 1959, D1.

<sup>40</sup>Mary Kelly, “Expenditures Point To Quality Education: High Quality Education Aid to Recruitment,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 28, 1957, 6.

but rule following and favoritism. For the AFT, merit pay plans were just one more way to get teachers to fall in line.<sup>41</sup>

While many White teachers experienced increasing requirements and standards in the name of quality as confusing hurdles that generated distrust of administrators, historically, those same requirements and standards represented something far more pernicious for teachers of color. Communities of color had long called for racially diverse schoolteachers. In 1880, Frederick Douglass joined with parents, community members, and religious leaders to call for Black teachers in Baltimore's public schools. "It is 15 years since the war, since freedom came to us," he explained, "and it is not too soon to ask for a share of the educational fund or the positions of dignity and influence it gives." "The school board cannot have peace until they give us colored teachers," he demanded.<sup>42</sup> As communities of color continued that fight for more than a century, White school leaders often dismissed their calls by casting doubt on the quality of Black teachers. In many instances, standards couched in the language of color-blind objectivity served as ways to bar non-White educators from obtaining positions in the nation's public schools.

In 1901, the *Atlanta Constitution* alerted readers to alleged fraud in the examination of Black teachers. According to the report, "several negroes" had somehow cheated on the certification exam on the basis of the fact that "the negroes, or a great majority of them, stood a better examination than the whites." Upon seeing the exams, commissioner of education J. T. Smith, the scorer, reported that "it at once became apparent . . . that something was wrong."<sup>43</sup> The candidates' tests were discarded and they were required to sit for the exam again. In 1906, teacher Mary E. Nalle was dismissed without cause from her position at the M Street High School in Washington, DC, after thirty years of service. When she demanded to know the reason for her dismissal, the legal adviser to the Board of Education confirmed that "it was for no offense or charge against her." Rather, the Board found that Nalle was "not qualified in all conditions" and "deficient in the necessary academic and pedagogic equipment of a competent teacher."<sup>44</sup> Nalle, a teacher of color, sued the Board for reinstatement, arguing that while they fired her for "incompetency" and "inefficiency," on all of her prior evaluations she earned ratings of "Good" or "Excellent." In 1913, her case made its way to the District Supreme Court where, once again, the Court sustained the Board's claims that such decisions were "privileged," and dismissed Nalle's claims.<sup>45</sup>

In 1945, 71 percent of Black teachers who sat for the recertification examination in South Carolina received scores that forced them into the lowest rankings and pay scales. For one White state senator, the results "prove[d] that the State Board was right in its assumption that the white teachers are far better prepared than the Negro teachers." For

<sup>41</sup>Mary Herrick, *Merit Rating: Dangerous Mirage or Master Plan* (Chicago: American Federation of Teachers, 1958).

<sup>42</sup>"Schools in Baltimore," *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1880, 1.

<sup>43</sup>"Will Have to Try It Again: Fraud Discovered in Examination of Colored Teacher," *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 6, 1901, 2.

<sup>44</sup>"Nalle Case Up To-Day," *Washington Post*, May 17, 1907, 13.

<sup>45</sup>*Hearing before Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1913), 460.

local and state NAACP leaders, the results proved that the examinations were untrustworthy and dangerous and, in response, they called on Black teachers to “not take the examination.” “Those who do,” NAACP state president James Hinton cautioned, “know exactly what they are doing and for what purpose the examination is given.”<sup>46</sup> As Christina Collins has documented in her book *Ethnically Qualified: Race, Merit, and the Selection of Urban Teachers, 1920–1980*, certification exams and the oral component, in particular, long functioned as a means to disqualify applicants of color. While some applicants of color were failed on the grounds of speaking with an accent, others were “promptly failed” upon showing up to take the exam.<sup>47</sup> This disqualification scheme was hardly a secret: in 1975 one writer reported of the teacher hiring process that “the City’s licensing system and the required examination had been working to the disadvantage of Blacks.”<sup>48</sup>

For many other teachers of color, meeting all the standards of “quality” set by districts was still not enough to secure a position in the schools. In 1904, Jean Hamilton, a prospective teacher of color, was considered among the brightest students in her class at the Allegheny Normal High School. Under Pennsylvania commonwealth law at the time, to gain a position in the schools, Hamilton, like all prospective teachers, was required to serve as a substitute teacher for three days each month during the school year. Hamilton dutifully made her way to the schools across Allegheny County to fill her post, only to be turned away nearly every time.<sup>49</sup> In 1937, Mignon Jones, a writer for the *New York Amsterdam News*, explained to readers that once again a White teacher was placed in the Lincoln Grammar School, “located in the heart” of New Rochelle, New York’s “colored community.” Students of color comprised 90 percent of the student body, and parents and community leaders there had long pressed for Black teachers. Harold Hunt, the local school superintendent, explained that even as Black candidates presented themselves, “the possibility of appointing a colored teacher had never been settled and approved by the board.”<sup>50</sup> In 1947, another group of educators gathered to discuss the importance of diversifying the teacher corps, but also “suggested caution in placing a Negro teacher in a community not quite ready for the step.”<sup>51</sup> Far from discrimination in teacher hiring being a phenomenon isolated to times past, recent research has documented similar persistent trends.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup>“71% of Negro Teachers Made Low Recertification Grades Greenwood Senator Reports,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 4, 1945, 7.

<sup>47</sup>Christina Collins, *“Ethnically Qualified”: Race, Merit, and the Selection of Urban Teachers, 1920–1980* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 75–81.

<sup>48</sup>Simon Anekwe, “HEW Investigates Board of Education’s Treatment of Minorities,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 7, 1976, A3.

<sup>49</sup>“Barred Colored Teacher: Allegheny School Board Has a Case of the Color Line on Its Hands,” *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1904, 5.

<sup>50</sup>Mignon A. Jones, “Again Omit Negro Teacher: White Instructor Is Put in Lincoln Post School Has Ninety-Nine Per Cent Colored Enrollment with No Race Teachers,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 14, 1937, 10.

<sup>51</sup>“Anti-bias Step Urged,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1947, 44.

<sup>52</sup>For instance, see: Diana D’Amico et al., “Where Are All the Black Teachers? Discrimination in the Teacher Labor Market,” *Harvard Educational Review* 87, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 26–49; Erikca Brown,

Not only did so-called color-blind standards and norms in the name of quality impede the diversification of the nation's teacher workforce, but as Andrea Guiden has documented in her study, "In Search of 'the Right Type': An Historical Examination of Black Teachers and Quality in the District of Columbia Public Schools, 1952–1964," the very notion of teacher quality was fundamentally and inextricably racialized and part of a broader backlash to the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954. In the years leading up to desegregation, Black teachers began to outnumber White teachers in the DC school district. Black teachers weren't just more numerous; they came to the schools with more qualifications. In 1952, 68 percent of White teachers in DCPS held a bachelor's degree or more, compared with 84 percent of Black teachers. Dr. Hobart M. Corning, superintendent of the district's schools, expressed concern that principals "had trouble finding qualified white teachers." As the decade proceeded, district leaders searched for "better teachers"—a euphemism for White teachers—even as qualified Black candidates abounded. Under the guise of creating a "racially balanced teaching force," school leaders enacted hiring plans that would increase the number of White teachers in the district at the expense of hiring and promoting Black teachers.<sup>53</sup> Not only has the idea of quality been a moving target for all teachers, but over the history of the nation's public schools, notions of quality have also functioned as a means to exclude and diminish teachers of color.

### *Teacher Quality and No Child Left Behind*

By 2001, federal-level education leaders, like their predecessors, concurred that teachers were simultaneously the root cause and the solution to myriad, far-reaching problems in the schools and beyond. According to one speech Paige delivered in Anaheim, California, in spring of 2003, growing achievement gaps between White and Black students were a function of teachers with low expectations.<sup>54</sup> For Paige and other policymakers, teachers were the barrier to school improvement. Why had the federal government's investment in local schools failed to improve educational outcomes, one author asked? She answered the question with the title of her essay: "It's the teachers, stupid."<sup>55</sup> Paige echoed these sentiments when he characterized the National Education Association as a "terrorist organization" that used "obstructionist scare tactics" to serve its own ends and hurt the nation's children.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the long, fraught history regarding notions of teacher quality, framers of No Child Left Behind not only positioned the Highly Qualified Teacher provision as the lynchpin of the legislation, but also as a radical, new experiment. Federal policymakers conceded that "it is difficult to measure directly the quality of teaching in

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"African American Teachers' Experiences with Racial Micro-Aggressions," *Educational Studies* 55, no. 2 (March 2019), 180–96.

<sup>53</sup>Andrea N. Guiden, "In Search of 'the Right Type': An Historical Examination of Black Teachers and Quality in the District of Columbia Public Schools, 1952–1964," PhD diss., George Mason University, 2020.

<sup>54</sup>Daniel Yi, "A Call to Raise the Bar in Classroom," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2003, B3.

<sup>55</sup>Marguerite Roza, "It's the Teachers, Stupid," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 19, 2001, 11.

<sup>56</sup>Nick Anderson, "Paige Calls Teachers Union a 'Terrorist Organization,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 24, 2004, A15.



our nation's classrooms."<sup>57</sup> Regardless, Paige—drawing on historical policy stories grounded in teacher blame—countered, “There is a wide consensus among researchers and policy makers that teacher quality is a key component of school quality—perhaps the key component.”<sup>58</sup> Just as he was certain that a preponderance of underperforming teachers was to blame for a host of school woes that reverberated nationally, he was certain that improving teachers, collectively, would be an educational and social elixir. In another speech, Paige explained, “No Child Left Behind also puts an emphasis on teaching because we know that teacher quality has a direct effect on student achievement. A good teacher often outweighs the negative effects of all the other challenges a disadvantaged child might shoulder when he or she walks into the classroom.”<sup>59</sup> Guided by the long-standing historical logic that positioned teachers as both problem and solution, federal policymakers mandated that all teachers have a bachelor's degree, full certification, and demonstrate “adequate” content knowledge; to iron out the critical details, they looked to the states. In the years since NCLB was enacted, a precise standard of teacher quality in terms of how it was defined, measured, and evaluated varied—at times significantly—from one state to the next.<sup>60</sup> Regardless, supporters of NCLB characterized the focus on teacher quality and standards as “revolutionary—not evolutionary—change.”<sup>61</sup>

As it had before, the issue of teacher quality in NCLB created confusion among teachers and debate among critics. According to a RAND research brief, faced with the swirl of policy rhetoric and different requirements across states, “a significant percentage of teachers” had no idea whether or not they were actually highly qualified.<sup>62</sup> And for many commentators, the basic requirements that governed the Highly Qualified Teacher provision had little bearing on what good teaching looked like. “A teacher can fit the bill as being highly qualified even if he or she has no disposition for working with children, has never taken a course in child development or classroom management, and has done nothing to demonstrate mastery of his or her subject matter,” Lawrence Baines, an associate dean at the University of Oklahoma, noted. Continuing, he asked, “If experience, disposition, education, or credentials don't matter for prospective teachers, then what does?”<sup>63</sup> As scholar Sonia Nieto offered, beyond testable knowledge and certification, highly qualified teachers also need “a passion for social justice, love and solidarity, and a commitment to challenge mainstream knowledge.”<sup>64</sup> In short, NCLB's emphasis on teacher quality not only

<sup>57</sup>US Department of Education, *A Talented, Dedicated, and Well-Prepared Teacher in Every Classroom* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1999), 3.

<sup>58</sup>US Department of Education, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, 2.

<sup>59</sup>Rod Paige, *Education in America: The Complacency Must End* (National Press Club, Washington, DC: Sept. 24, 2003).

<sup>60</sup>US Department of Education, *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act*, vol. 8, *Teacher Quality Under NCLB: Final Report* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2009).

<sup>61</sup>The Teaching Commission, *Teaching at Risk*, 19.

<sup>62</sup>RAND Corporation, “Evaluating Teacher Quality Under No Child Left Behind,” RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2007.

<sup>63</sup>Lawrence Baines, “When ‘Highly Qualified’ Teachers Aren't,” *Education Week*, March 7, 2017, available online at <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/opinion-when-highly-qualified-teachers-arent/2017/03>.

<sup>64</sup>Sonia Nieto, “Schools for a New Majority: The Role of Teacher Education in Hard Times,” *New Educator* 1, no. 1 (2005), 27–43.



stemmed from the historical policy story of blaming teachers but, as it was in the past, remained a catchphrase that obscured more than it clarified.

### Teacher Blame as the Engine of Federal Reform

As readers of this essay will know, public education is not a fundamental right protected by the United States Constitution. Rather, public education falls under the purview of state and local governments. It is perhaps this dynamic that makes the No Child Left Behind law initially striking. Indeed, even as federal-level officials had long affirmed the significance of public education, an essential historical characteristic prior to NCLB was deference to states: the federal government could entice but not mandate; NCLB and its focus on accountability flipped that script for states that accepted Title I funding. Scholars have long debated the extent to which the No Child Left Behind law represented a gradual evolution or a “transformative shift” in the role of the federal government in public education.<sup>65</sup>

In spite of this historiographical debate, one point of unity across these analyses is the lack of attention to teachers as historical actors and policy targets. In Jesse Rhodes’s important 2012 study, teachers and the question of teacher quality surface briefly. Similarly, in Garth Davies’s exploration of the growth of big government in education policy, teachers are largely absent. In his important analysis of NCLB, Maris Vinovskis surmised that “our best teachers usually end up working in affluent suburbs rather than in the impoverished inner cities and rural areas,” identifying teachers as drivers of school outcomes—the dominant feature of the teacher blame policy narrative.<sup>66</sup> Rather than being an indication of teacher-bashing in the university, accounts like this one reveal the extent to which teacher blame has become an integral aspect of the grammar of public school reform, one of the unquestioned truths we hold about how schools function and why they fail.

For Commissioner of Education Eaton and Secretary of Education Paige, as this essay’s epigraphs reveal, the character and quality of local public school teachers were matters of national significance. When viewed from the vantage point of the history of teacher reform, as in this section, two critical points about the role of the federal government in public education become clear. First, even as scholars debate the novelty of NCLB, they tend to agree that its roots trace directly to the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965; however, as this article demonstrates, a focus on teachers broadens our historical scope and reveals evidence of federal involvement in local public schools, albeit in different forms, concurrent with the

<sup>65</sup>Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005*, illustrated ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 9; Maris Vinovskis, *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008); Lorraine M. McDonald, “No Child Left Behind and the Federal Role in Education: Evolution or Revolution?” *Peabody Journal of Education* 80, no. 2 (Nov. 2009), 19–38.

<sup>66</sup>Jesse H. Rhodes, *An Education in Politics: The Origin and Evolution of No Child Left Behind* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007); Vinovskis, *From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind*, 228.

formation of municipal school systems. Second, federal education reform is inextricable from policy stories grounded in teacher blame. Teachers as problem and solution is the grammar of public school reform and the engine driving education policy, from local school districts to the federal government.

In 1867, Congress approved the creation of the federal-level Department of Education in recognition of the national significance of local public schools. Even as it was demoted to an Office of Education the following year because of worries of federal overreach, its goal was to collect and distribute information about best practices and innovations emerging in schools around the country. The first commissioner of education, Henry Barnard, reported that his office would diffuse “such information respecting the organization and management of school systems, and methods of teaching, as shall aid the people of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems, and otherwise promote the cause of education throughout the country.”<sup>67</sup> Without any authoritative power, during these years, the federal government helped create norms and coherence across the nation’s schools. In 1874, Commissioner of Education John Eaton described his role as “an educational signal-officer,” one who can “point out the path of danger or of safety.”<sup>68</sup>

From the start, improving schools and improving teachers fit hand to glove in policy logic. As Henry Barnard explained in 1867, “impressed with the paramount importance of the Teacher,” his primary goal as commissioner was to “obtain the fullest and latest information . . . for the professional improvement of teachers, especially of those connected with public schools.”<sup>69</sup> Highlighting the work of the State Normal School at Salem in Massachusetts in his first report, Barnard included the school’s statement on the significance of public school teachers in the hope of sparking emulation: “There is no more sure defense of republican liberty than the public school; there is no truer personal defender of American institutions than the schoolmaster.”<sup>70</sup> Over the subsequent decades, these reports, combined with small financial incentives, helped to solidify practices with regard to teacher preparation, certification, and remuneration, giving way to a policy isomorphism that transcended local idiosyncrasies.

By the mid-twentieth century, the role of the federal government as goal setter, information sharer, and enticer was well established, particularly in the area of teacher policy. In 1961, the US Education Office released its report *Ten-Year Aims in Education*. “Since the founding of our nation,” the authors explained, “education has been recognized as a chief means of maintaining and advancing the higher values and aspirations of the American people.”<sup>71</sup> The report continued, “The quality of our entire educational program turns on the quality of the teacher.”<sup>72</sup> With the century-

<sup>67</sup>Department of Education, *Report of the Commissioner of Education, with Circulars and Documents Accompanying the Same, Submitted to the Senate and House of Representatives June 2, 1868* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1868), ix.

<sup>68</sup>*Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1874* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1875), v.

<sup>69</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Education . . . June 2, 1868*, 651.

<sup>70</sup>*Report of the Commissioner of Education . . . June 2, 1868*, 702.

<sup>71</sup>US Education Office, *Ten-Year Aims in Education, Staffing and Constructing Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, 1959–1969* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1961), 3.

<sup>72</sup>US Education Office, *Ten-Year Aims in Education*, 5.

long foundation of policy stories centered on blaming teachers firmly established, the next step in the escalation of the federal role in public education—the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—emerged sure-footed. On January 12, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson stood before Congress and outlined a dire state of affairs. Harkening back to the 1787 Continental Congress and the early commitment that “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged,” Johnson explained, “There is a darker side to education in America.” Dropout rates and school failure came with high costs, he warned. With unemployment and crime rates soaring, Americans had a pragmatic choice to make. “We now spend about \$450 a year per child in our public schools,” Johnson offered. “But we spend \$1,800 a year to keep a delinquent youth in a detention home, \$2,500 for a family on relief, \$3,500 a year for a criminal in state prison.” Johnson warned that society was in dire trouble, but that public schools, if reformed, could be the salve—a refrain that reverberated across generations.<sup>73</sup>

Four months after Johnson’s call to arms, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and later that same year the Higher Education Act of 1965, creating the National Teacher Corps. The Corps was the counterpoint to ESEA. If schools were failing, funds alone would not fix them. Instead, drawing on deeply entrenched ways of defining educational problems, federal policymakers contended that schools failed because they were deprived of the teachers they needed. The Corps would fix that problem. “Based on the Peace Corps principles of dedication, sacrifice, idealism and skill,” Senator Edward Kennedy explained, “the National Teacher Corps could attract highly qualified, highly experienced teachers to take on the challenging job of going to the poor and teaching.”<sup>74</sup> The goal, as historian Bethany Rogers has argued, was to improve the schools by attracting “better” people to them. According to the architects of the Corps, “the ‘best and the brightest’ . . . could better solve the problems of educating so-called disadvantaged students than professionals conventionally prepared for the classroom.”<sup>75</sup> This policy aspiration for better teachers was the direct corollary to teacher blame: *if only we had better teachers, then we would have better schools.*

At its root, NCLB was a teacher reform initiative, picking up where ESEA and the National Teacher Corps left off. “There is no doubt the No Child Left Behind Act is a bold law,” federal policymakers explained in an open letter to America’s teachers. “It was intended to be so. But don’t forget that it was written with you, our nation’s teachers, in mind. The No Child Left Behind Act recognizes that teachers are on the front lines of this historic effort, and it creates a system that provides unprecedented support and assistance to help you be successful in your job.”<sup>76</sup> From the notion of the Highly Qualified Teacher, to mandated assessments and accountability systems, to new prescriptions for teacher preparation, to public reporting on teacher

<sup>73</sup>Lyndon B. Johnson, “Toward Full Educational Opportunity,” Jan. 12, 1965, in James W. Fraser, ed., *The School in the United States: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 319–21.

<sup>74</sup>“National Teacher Corps Urged to Aid Children in Poor Areas,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1965, 33.

<sup>75</sup>Bethany Rogers, “‘Better’ People, Better Teaching: The Vision of the National Teacher Corps, 1965–1968,” *History of Education Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Aug. 2009), 348.

<sup>76</sup>US Department of Education, *No Child Left Behind: A Toolkit for Teachers* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2003), 6. See the full document at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED480850.pdf>.

qualifications and student performance, NCLB embodied the four historical policy stories that have shaped the nature of American public education reform: (1) society is in trouble, (2) public schools are social salves, (3) teachers are to blame, and (4) better teachers will lead to better schools and communities. In looking to teachers, policymakers and politicians looked past social inequality and the inequitable distribution of resources within and beyond public schools. In looking to teachers, policymakers and politicians looked beyond the structures and institutions that shaped the environments in which students and teachers lived, learned, and worked. As a report from the Education Trust explained, “In the hands of our best teachers, the effects of poverty and institutional racism would melt away.”<sup>77</sup> From recruitment to tenure, initial preparation to professional development, curricula to assessments, NCLB left no aspect or phase of teachers’ work lives untouched. In this law, federal policymakers extended a historical logic that framed teachers as both the problem and the solution, the reason why schools were falling short and the mechanism by which they could improve.<sup>78</sup>

In the years following the enactment of NCLB and the implementation of high-stakes tests, teacher evaluations, and public reports of failing schools and teachers mandated by the law, many teachers reported feeling afraid, demoralized, and ready to leave the profession.<sup>79</sup> As one reporter for the *New York Times* chronicled, “The slump in the economy, coupled with the acrimonious discourse over how much weight test results and seniority should be given in determining a teacher’s worth, have conspired to bring morale among the nation’s teachers to its lowest point in more than 20 years, according to a survey of teachers, parents and students.”<sup>80</sup> This evidence aside, another study offered that NCLB may not have significantly affected teachers’ job satisfaction and commitment. Taking a contrary stance and drawing on the Schools and Staffing Survey, which was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics from 1987 to 2011, Jason Grissom and colleagues argued that when it came to how teachers felt about their work, there was only modest evidence of a negative impact from NCLB.<sup>81</sup>

From a historical standpoint, Grissom et al.’s findings make sense: NCLB did not put teachers in the iron cage; they were in one already. Instead, it fortified the bars with twenty-first-century materials. Accountability, focus on outputs and penalties, the assertiveness of the federal government: these were new. But the roots from which all this sprang—teacher blame—was as old as the public schools. Given all of this, this next historical truism is largely unsurprising: America’s public school

<sup>77</sup>For the quote from Kati Haycock’s report for The Education Trust, see Haycock, “Good Teaching Matters . . . a Lot,” *OAH Magazine of History* 13, no. 1 (Fall 1998), 62.

<sup>78</sup>No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 101, Stat. 1425 (2002).

<sup>79</sup>See, for instance, Gail L. Sunderman et al., *Listening to Teachers: Classroom Realities and No Child Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004); Meredith Wronowski and Angela Urick, “Teacher and School Predictors of Teacher Deprofessionalization and Demoralization in the United States,” *Educational Policy* 35, no. 5 (May 2019), 679–720.

<sup>80</sup>Fernanda Santos, “Teacher Survey Shows Morale Is at Low Point,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2012, 13.

<sup>81</sup>Jason A. Grissom, Sean Nicholson-Crotty, and James R. Harrington, “Estimating the Effects of No Child Left Behind on Teachers’ Work Environments and Job Attitudes,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 36, no. 4 (Dec. 2014), 417–36.

teachers have long reported their discontent, even as the conditions of teaching and schooling transformed. In 1854, one author writing anonymously under the pseudonym, A. Teacher, explained, "There are many who feel the oppression of some of the regulations and anticipate much evil (to themselves at least) in other contemplated laws for the government of the schools." Far from offering respect, the author noted, policymakers "attempt to govern adults through a system of pains and penalties such as might answer (although imperfectly) to govern small children."<sup>82</sup> In 1947, Benjamin Fine reported, "Never before has the morale of the teaching staff been as low as it is today. Everywhere teachers are discontented, dissatisfied with their profession, almost ashamed to be teachers."<sup>83</sup> In 1973, a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times* echoed that refrain upon the results of a new survey: "Teacher morale is at an all-time low."<sup>84</sup> In 1992, amid budget cuts another reporter chronicled plummeting teacher morale. Lavanda Robinson, a teacher, said, "I've started looking; I'll be reading the want ads."<sup>85</sup> Surely, not all teachers were discontent. But even as the buildings teachers worked in expanded and modernized and students received more resources and supports beyond the classroom, for many teachers, sentiments of low morale resonated over this long period. NCLB did not create the feeling among teachers that they were overworked and disrespected; that—along with reforms that simultaneously situated teachers as the problem and minimized the aspects of instruction that were in their control—had long been in place.

Just as there is something deeply historical about the American faith in public schools as both beacon and protector, there is something equally historical about the American conviction that those institutions have failed because of teachers. This logic has become axiomatic; it is part and parcel of the grammar of public education reform, of how we define school problems and strive to fix them. *But why?* This grammar of school reform exists because it has become an unquestioned certainty. But more than that, this policy story of teacher blame persists because it works so well, because people and corporations have come to benefit from it.

Blaming teachers is easy. It is a politically convenient strategy that requires no political will. It is how we have come to explain school problems; thus, there is virtually no risk involved. While it is clear today as it has been for generations that public schools disadvantage and fail some of the nation's children, the flip side of that coin is also true: public schools give advantages and work quite well for some of the nation's children. Just as some people lose from the present organization of our communities and public schools, others gain from those same arrangements. The teacher blame game offers no institutional or structural disruption. Rather, the teacher blame game preserves the bureaucratic organization of public schooling, making that structure durable and giving job security to the legions of administrators within it.

<sup>82</sup>A. Teacher, "Proposed Re-examination of the School Teachers," *New York Daily Times*, July 13, 1854, 3.

<sup>83</sup>Benjamin Fine, "Teacher Morale Ebbing in Nation," *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1947, 17.

<sup>84</sup>Austin Lee, "CTA Sharply Critical of Pasadena District: Report Charges Schools Are Poorly Run and Teacher Morale Is at All-Time Low," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1973, 6.

<sup>85</sup>Charisse Jones, "School Cuts Take Big Toll on Teachers' Morale: Education: School Officials, Teachers and Parents Say the Most Trying School Year in Memory Is About to Begin," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 16, 1992, A3.

In many ways, the teacher blame game has become sound and fury signifying nothing. The calls for radical reform yield policies and practices that are predictable iterations of things we have seen before. The teacher blame game allows politicians and pundits to seem serious about education while allowing other insidious aspects of school and social policy—such as race-based school assignments, inequitable funding formulas and curricular offerings, crumbling infrastructure, and documented discrimination in teacher hiring, to name just a few—to fester. Moreover, entire industries have cropped up and are sustained by the policy stories that blame teachers. Textbook companies, test makers, education policymakers—they all exist because of the same fear Joseph Rice expressed in the late 1800s: “Our teachers are too weak to stand alone.” Rooted in myth rather than reality, and entwined with gendered and racialized assumptions, the fear of the inept teacher has fueled education reform and institutionalized the bureaucratic order of public schooling.

Indeed, the good news is that history is not destiny. Policy stories and ways of defining problems can change. So, too, can bureaucracies and institutions. How, then, do we break teachers free from their proverbial iron cage? In our single-minded focus on blaming teachers, we have left a range of solutions untested. What if, instead of looking past social and institutional inequality to teachers, we tackle those issues first? What if, instead of muzzling teachers with reform, we cultivate their expertise, give them autonomy, and turn to them to lead?

**Diana D’Amico Pawlewicz** is Associate Professor in the Educational Foundations and Research Program at the University of North Dakota. In addition to her academic scholarship, she is a public scholar and currently serves as associate editor for the *Washington Post’s* “Made by History” section.