Book Review

David F. Labaree. *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 312 pp. $29.95 Hardcover.

David Labaree has reached perhaps the apogee of an institutionalist argument about the development of American education. In his new book, *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling*, he maintains that schooling provides little direct economic benefit to society, yet offers a conduit to higher status by mediating the job market and other activities associated with getting ahead in American life. A never-ending competition for advancement has ensured the growth of education as an enterprise, coupled with a uniquely American penchant for utilizing schools as a substitute for social policies to address economic inequality, a growing problem historically. The result, in his view, is a behemoth public education system costing fantastic sums without yielding much tangible benefit. His prescription for reform is benign neglect, basically leaving the system to its own devices since he asserts that the actual content of schooling is largely irrelevant to its ultimate effects. The book ends on a dour note, as Labaree speculates that Americans lack the political will to fundamentally change the current arrangement, which "locks us in a spiral of educational expansion and credential inflation that has come to deplete our resources and exhaust our vitality" (p. 256).

Labaree arrives at this conclusion following an exposition that is historical more in form than content. He begins with the common school era, which is depicted as offering the first and only successful school reform movement in American history. Its accomplishment, Labaree argues, came from forging a common set of educational experiences for all Americans, which established unity and sociability by focusing on moral and political education rather than academic or cognitive development. Indeed, he goes so far as to argue that common school reformers did not care about the substance of schooling, but were principally concerned about socialization and creating shared experiences. "What students learned," Labaree writes, "about math, science, literature and history—the four core school subjects then and now—was beside the point" (p. 74). Yet he does not consider evidence of reform concerns about the mastery of academic subjects, especially in the high schools but also in elementary or common schools of the time. Labaree's discussion of the period draws on just a handful of sources, and he ignores important regional and urban/rural differences in reform.

Rochester, New York, is offered as a microcosm of the nation, but of course it reflected a local cultural and political milieu that was hardly typical of other parts of the country.

The book's treatment of the Progressive Era and the nation's second great educational reform movement is more credible. Here Labaree demonstrates his remarkable talents as an institutional or organizational analyst. He makes the now familiar argument that administrative progressives dominated the period and that their pedagogical counterparts were ineffective. But the heart of his discussion concerns sources of resistance to reform that appeared at this time, and which presumably still operate today. In this regard he builds upon the work of David Tyack, Larry Cuban and others who have emphasized the local and variegated quality of American educational institutions in arguing that reformers have been largely unsuccessful in achieving their goals. Labaree argues that four levels of the education system—governance, administration, teachers, and students—each present challenges to successful reform, and his discussion of the motivations and capacity for resistance to change in each of these domains is forceful. Indeed, his treatment of teachers is worth the price of the book. He also argues that progressive reformers succeeded in expanding the functions of schooling, further marginalizing academic purposes especially at the secondary level. This is a familiar point to historians but is critical to the book's larger argument.

Following his discussion of progressivism, Labaree switches gears to consider the impact of schooling on social and economic change. Again, he follows a long tradition asserting that the effect of formal education is minimal at best, although he fails to cite Randall Collins, perhaps its principal figure. He downplays the rather well documented advances made by American women and African Americans that have been linked to their growing educational attainment. He also maintains that the impact of educational expansion on the nation's economic growth has been overstated by economists. In a chapter-length treatment, he launches a frontal assault on the work of Claudia Golden and Lawrence Katz and their suggestion that the rise of the high school was a critical feature of the nation's ascendance to economic superiority. Here Labaree enters a debate between economists favoring human capital and signaling explanations of education in the labor market. Labaree clearly prefers the latter, but goes much further than most in suggesting that the content of schooling is irrelevant to its economic impact. He does not delve very deeply, however, into the considerable literature on these questions, including recent work on the non-cognitive dimensions of school, and his argument consequently rings a bit hollow. In short, to suggest that formal education has historically had negligible human capital effects without carefully examining evidence well beyond that offered by Goldin and Katz is far from satisfactory.

In the end one wonders just what kind of evidence Labaree would accept as an adequate demonstration that schooling can contribute in positive ways to social change or the public good. He shrugs off improvement in the status of women and the impact of desegregation, even though millions of lives were positively affected by related educational reforms. He dismisses the nearly 14 percent contribution that Golden and Katz estimated that secondary schooling made to economic growth across many decades, yet also argues that cognitive development (or human capital growth) was not a goal of education. This position is puzzling but essential, it turns out, to the book's basic thesis that educational expansion has been driven primarily by a frantic race for credentials to gain or maintain social status, a process that Labaree suggests has little bearing on the greater welfare of American society. As suggested above, this is hardly a cheerful assessment of the role of schooling in history, but it would have been a good deal more credible had the argument been grounded in more solid evidence and made better use of relevant scholarship in a variety of fields, particularly labor economics and sociology.

But Labaree's foremost accomplishment may lie in explaining just how the educational system has grown largely impervious to reform. In this respect the book is a worthy successor to the work of his Stanford colleagues who have long argued that institutional change is a very uncertain prospect at best. Well-established organizations such as schools, after all, are far more responsive to their immediate clients and their own internal logics of performance than to mandates for reform from far-flung policy elites. Persuading the latter group to temper expectations and to appreciate the enormity of the task before them would be a significant contribution indeed.

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