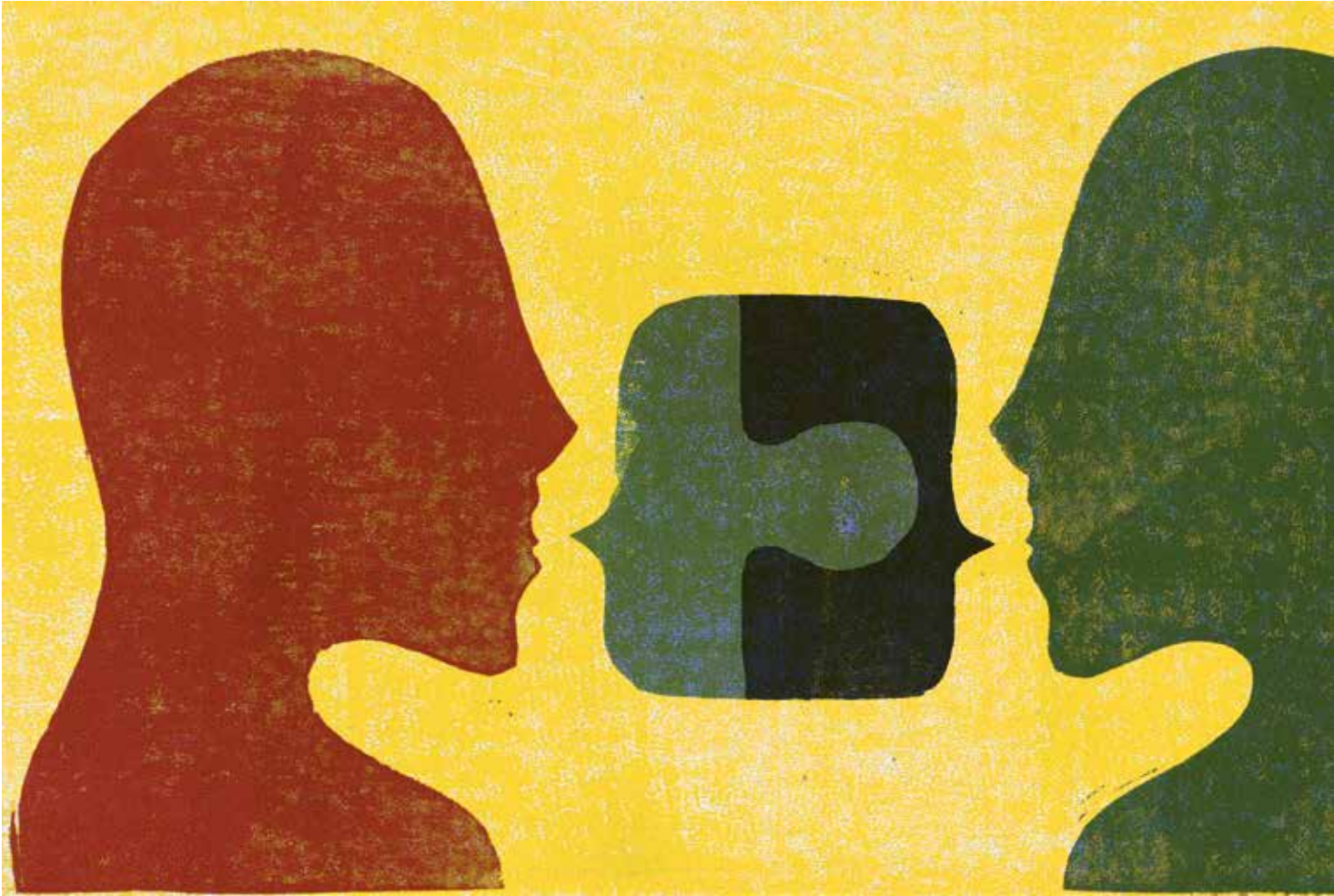


# The Profession Speaks

## Educator Perspectives on School Reform



BY BRETT GARDINER MURPHY

For more than 20 years, members of what has come to be known as the education reform movement have told a largely singular story about public education in the United States. It's a story that has crossed party lines unlike any other in recent memory. This movement has pushed relentlessly for accountability-based reforms to improve a failing system and solve our country's problem of inequality.

Their story goes something like this: The education system in the United States once ranked at the top in the world, but today we find our position slipping. For this to change, we need a system of standardized exams that can provide clear data about where students are succeeding and failing and that tell us what we can


do to make up the difference. If we find that teachers are not helping students fulfill their potential, we must hold them accountable and, if necessary, replace them with quality teachers who can get the job done. If a school is failing to meet students' needs, we must immediately improve or close it and provide better choices for families, so that children are not relegated to a poor education based on their zip code.

When No Child Left Behind became law in 2002, it almost tripled the number of required state tests overnight.<sup>1</sup> In a 2015 survey, teachers reported that their students spent an average of 19 days out of the school year taking district- and state-mandated tests.<sup>2</sup> Schools in areas targeted by education reformers were often subjected to even more required testing by their local districts. One study found that by high school, city kids spent 266 percent more time on local testing than their suburban peers.<sup>3</sup> And that didn't even count the amount of time that teachers spent within classes preparing students for the tests and having them take practice exams, or the ways in which pedagogy itself changed to align more closely to the tests.<sup>4</sup>

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Almost everything in public education—from evaluating teachers, to choosing which schools needed to be improved or shut down, to deciding whether new charter schools were successful or not—became connected to these exams. By 2016, 42 states relied on test scores in their teacher evaluation systems,<sup>5</sup> but the systems were notoriously flawed. Today, teachers report



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the lowest morale in decades,<sup>6</sup> fewer college students plan to become educators,<sup>7</sup> and teacher shortages are rampant in nearly every state.<sup>8</sup> Schools with the highest numbers of low-income students and students of color are still served by the most inexperienced teachers with fewer credentials, and they experience the highest rates of teacher turnover.<sup>9</sup>

From 2001 to 2013, 21,010 schools were closed, a disproportionate number of which served low-income black and brown students.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, a series of new charter schools promised to raise student outcomes, as measured by test scores, faster than traditional schools. As a result, the number of charter schools grew more than 300 percent during almost the same time period, and 2,000 new charter schools were added in the past five years alone.<sup>11</sup>

I taught in a traditional public high school in Harlem at the height of the testing craze and when charter schools were spreading like wildfire throughout New York City. One year, I had a group of students who had been part of an entire grade that was removed from their charter school because of underperformance. The fol-

lowing year, I watched other students get accepted into a different charter school only to end up right back with us six months later when the school deemed they “were not a good fit.”

When I left that school for another high school in Brooklyn, I taught a student who worked hard to improve her academic standing over her four years with us only to not be allowed to graduate because she was a few points away from passing one of five required standardized exams. She became increasingly anxious about taking tests, broke down crying one day out of frustration and fear, and started to be unresponsive in conversations about her future. I also saw teachers change their curriculum from a dynamic project-based model with real-world applications to focus on test preparation, because their tenure applications had been denied due to inadequate test scores. All this for a test that students weren’t required to take and had no reason to be invested in.

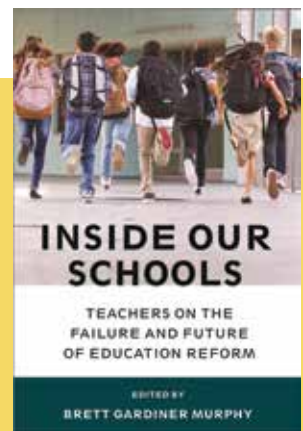
Nearly every time a new policy came through from on high, it was painful. In a scene common in schools across the country, our principal would share a new dictate with us, and, immediately, teachers around the room could see why this was a terrible idea for our students. It is confounding how people so removed from schools can create policies that are no more than large-scale experiments, often tried out on our nation’s most vulnerable children.

In an attempt to open up the real worlds of our schools to policymakers, reformers, journalists, and the public at large, I decided a book by classroom teachers was needed. I started gathering stories from educators around the country. I asked them to share their perspectives on the accountability-era reforms and the alternatives they were building to create a more equitable education for their students. By getting an inside view of how these policies were experienced by real people and reading about the care, passion, and intelligence with which many teachers try to provide a high-quality education, I hoped to inject a bit of reality into education and restore some humanity to a field overrun by data sets and platitudes.

### Sharing Their Stories

To find the teachers for the collection, I reached out to teacher activist groups, teacher unions, community-based organizations, professors in colleges of education, education writers and commentators, and parent organizations to see if they knew teachers who would be interested in writing about their experiences. As you

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might imagine, many teachers have stories about how policies connected to accountability-based reform have affected their work; the problem was finding the time to write. In the end, I compiled and edited 25 stories from teachers across the United States into *Inside Our Schools: Teachers on the Failure and Future of Education Reform*. The contributors range from kindergarten teachers to college educators, first-year teachers to 20-year veterans. They are Montessori teachers, special education teachers, and teachers of English language learners. They teach in big schools, small schools, traditional public schools, magnet schools, and charter schools.

Despite their different geographic zones and school types, these educators present some important commonalities. Their stories are deeply personal, giving us a look at the students and families in the crosshairs of test-based accountability while also sharing their thoughts and feelings as they navigate various obstacles. And, they offer an alternative vision of the ways in which teachers are already rethinking education, as Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos claims we should start doing.<sup>12</sup>

The book is organized around the recurring buzzwords the mainstream education reform movement has used to define its policies: accountability, quality, choice, failure, and equity. Chapter introductions explain today's hot-button education issues, providing the context necessary for any reader to have a clear sense of the state of education policy and research in each of these areas. But, by design, the testimony of teachers makes up the bulk of the book. It is through the experiences and voices of teachers that readers can visualize life in public schools in ways that usually go unseen by those who are not educators.

In the chapter of the book titled "Failure," for example, teachers unpack the caricatures of "bad schools" portrayed by many reformers as hopeless institutions where young people's dreams wither and die. These educators show the nuances at play in schools labeled "failing." In one story, K. Jennifer Oki, a former teacher in New York City, describes reading the account of her school drawn up by city officials, aired in a public hearing about the school's closure. Her story, "On Dissonance and Light: How to Tell a Story of Success or Failure," contrasts their vision of her school with what she experienced as a founding teacher there. She writes,

I cannot reconcile this with the school I knew; I do not recognize it. I *do* recognize the teachers that parents describe going above and beyond for their children. I recognize the colleagues that teachers reference as they explain how their peers make do with little, work within constraints, [and] handle oversized classes and undersized classrooms. I remember our [special education teacher support services] room in a converted closet, our special education pull-out students literally relegated to a place where we tuck things away, and the converted "classrooms" in the basement when we were stretched for space.

Her essay presents a complicated image that is rarely found in stories about public schools, and the narrative form allows for the kind of context that numbers alone belie. Oki does not shy away from sharing how she thinks the school should have been better,

but she shows us how the decisions made at the time seemed sensible within a "rigged system" set up by local, state, and federal education policy. It is this real-life complexity with which educators and policymakers must contend if we are serious about improving all schools.

The book also provides numerous examples of how we could do "reform" better. The last story of the "Failure" chapter explores the possibilities for school improvement from the bottom up, guided by teachers and families working together. Liz Sullivan details how one school in Oakland, California, successfully undertook this process. Her story, "From Whittier to Greenleaf: A Community-Based Transformation Story," reads like a suspense novel, from the early days of organizing within the school, to an attempted charter school takeover in the middle of improvement




efforts, to meetings led by administrators, families, and teachers to reimagine what their school could be. Through this years-long process, she writes, the school has become a place where "parent volunteers proudly wear school t-shirts, photos of every student adorn the leaves of a tree painted in the entryway, and the quiet buzz of student conversation spills out into the hallways."

Each of the chapters proceeds in a similar fashion. In the "Accountability" chapter, we hear about how testing has narrowed instruction and disempowered English language learners and special education students. But the chapter ends on a high note with the story of a public high school that has been given the freedom to use performance-based assessments. In the "Quality" chapter, teachers discuss their disillusionment with an alternative certification program and with unfair evaluation systems, while others describe the success of teacher-led inquiry groups and student surveys as alternative models to provide educators feedback and help them improve. In the "Choice" chapter, we hear one teacher's demoralizing experience at a no-excuses charter school but also get a look inside a union-led, community-based charter school and an innovative teacher-led STEM (science,

technology, engineering, and math) school. Reading about these experiences helps us connect policies to real people and pushes us to visualize what might be possible for our own schools.

The last chapter of the book tackles the biggest problem facing our public education system today: equity. While reformers have centered their focus on accountability through test scores, they've all but ignored the resegregation of public education,<sup>13</sup> the cutting of school budgets and broader social services since the 2008 recession,<sup>14</sup> and the role of zero-tolerance discipline in pushing students of color, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) students, and students with disabilities into the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>15</sup> Teachers in the book discuss how they build a more just education within their own classrooms, respect their students, understand their socio-emotional needs,



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implement restorative justice programs, advocate for culturally responsive pedagogy, and provide space for their students to critically analyze the world around them.

The “Equity” chapter also makes clear that teachers and policy-makers must have a better connection in our joint efforts to improve public education. As educators, we have a lot of work to do to ensure that our classrooms and schools work for *all* our students, but we can't provide everything that young people and their families need without broader systemic changes.

**W**ith the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), we are now starting the next phase of reform. States have submitted their ESSA plans, with some doubling down on the current path and others making changes that allow schools the resources and space to improve. The plans so far are a mixed bag and will require continued attention and pressure. At the federal level, DeVos has made clear her efforts to radically restructure public education through a system of “choices” that includes a dramatic increase in charter schools alongside voucher programs for private schools.

In the past, teachers have rightfully pointed out that we are rarely asked into the conversations and meetings where decisions are made. At this moment, the stakes are too high for us to wait for an invitation. Privatizers will continue to promote an image of public schools that suggests we are all failing and nothing positive is happening in our classrooms. Our stories are needed to disrupt this picture.

Say what you will about how the Internet has shortened students' attention spans, it has democratized whose point of view can be heard, including our own. I started a website connected to the book, [InsideOurSchools.com](http://InsideOurSchools.com), where anyone involved in public schools—teachers, parents, and students—can upload their stories through videos, audio recordings, or written reflections. It's just one of many ways that we can use our voices in the years ahead.

The point is not that everything is fine the way it is now; the injustices that have thrived in our public education system throughout history need to be dismantled and repaired. But the people closest to our schools—teachers, in collaboration with families and students—should be a big part of building, testing, and implementing the next steps for a public education focused on equity. The 25 teachers who wrote for *Inside Our Schools* are direct evidence of that, and there are thousands more teachers with stories and perspectives that need to be heard. In our current context, it is doubtful we're going to be offered a platform from which to speak. It's time that we make our own. □

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