



Can the Newly-Reelected Obama Save the American Public School?

A Conversation between William Julius Wilson and Sylvie Laurent

The American public school remains in a state of crisis. Even as this crisis plays out, reform-minded Americans continue to view the public school as a main lever for change, the object of all their hopes for reducing poverty and equalizing opportunity in the United States.

Can the public school ever realize such lofty aspirations? In a bold move, the federal government is investing \$4.3 billion in an “educational New Deal,” a thorough reform that involves the mainstreaming of charter schools. This program promises fundamental change in the way American schools, both public and semi-public, operate.

The key question of our time: Will this reform deliver on the aspirations behind it? We’ve asked sociologist William Julius Wilson and French cultural historian Sylvie Laurent, both affiliated with the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University, to take on this question. The following is an excerpt of their ongoing conversation about the proper balance between efficiency and equal opportunity in undertaking public school reform. Although *Pathways Magazine* does not ordinarily publish opinion pieces, this is a topic of such fundamental importance that we think it warrants the publication of a back-and-forth conversation of this sort, in which the opinions, as you’ll see, are closely and properly rooted in the facts.

SL: The absence of a centralized system of education in the United States indicates that public education is not considered to be a crucial element of the welfare state. If public education is understood to be a fundamental priority, then the nation-state simply has to organize how it's delivered and ensure that certain key commitments, especially those pertaining to equal access, are met. Although I understand the urgency of reform, I am not at ease with the carrot-and-stick approach to educational rehabilitation that Obama's policies embrace, especially in the absence of measures requiring resource equity across public schools.

The main reason U.S. schools rank poorly on international assessments is simply that average test scores for students of color are poor. The assumption that the American school system is a complete failure is actually inaccurate. The poorest schools, which are also the most segregated and lowest-performing schools, are the real problem. Penalizing these "failing" schools, which the current administration supports, entails punishing poor students twice.

This punitive approach is all the more unfair to the poorest American schools when they have been suffering most under the current economic downturn. In recent months, many California teachers have been laid off, and studies show that the poorest districts are disproportionately affected by such budget cuts. To be sure, President Obama has tried to mitigate teachers' layoffs, but his Race to the Top program does not redistribute resources from the most to the least advantaged.

So here's my question to you: Given that you have worked for years on urban marginalization and the need for public voluntarism to overcome it, don't you think this failure to invest in our least-advantaged students is the real issue?

WJW: There are many explanations for the particularly dramatic miseducation of students of color in concentrated poverty areas. Not too long ago, the education scholar Jean Anyon outlined her vision for a more comprehensive vision of school reform, one in which we move beyond attempts to change only the educational system to one in which we address more fundamental problems in the city environment itself. You're echoing Anyon's main argument, that in the absence of a long-range strategy to eradicate the underlying causes of racial isolation and poverty, efforts to reform urban public schools cannot be very effective. Although I agree with Anyon that improving the life chances of inner-city residents would lead to improvements in inner-city public schools, we can also make headway by implementing the right educational policies even while we are working on reforming the larger urban society.


Simply put, we cannot wait to improve the life chances of inner-city residents to upgrade city schools. Recent systematic

randomized studies of public charter schools in Boston and New York provide the most compelling evidence that schools can elevate the success of poor students and students of color independent of a comprehensive reform of the larger society. I am an advocate of public charter schools that operate independently of the local school board and that often feature a curriculum and educational philosophy different from the other schools in the public school system. Overcoming institutional entrenchment should be one of our primary objectives if we are committed to combating inequality in education. And that is exactly what Obama and Arne Duncan, our Secretary of Education, are trying to do by promoting the growth of public charter schools and incentive programs, such as Race to the Top.

SL: I understand that public charter schools can temporarily address such entrenchment, provided that they are supported long enough to do so. Public charter schools are often proposed as quick fixes, and given the political neglect of traditional schools, charters are likely to be a Trojan horse with respect to a public sector that is currently under siege. Elected "reformers" are pushing new legislation to limit the power of labor unions; Chris Christie epitomizes this trend. My concern is that ideology is disguised as expertise and that an ultraconservative agenda is masquerading as reformism. From Linda Darling Hammond (who was Obama's counselor on education during the 2008 campaign) to the NAACP, most progressives would rather see a "Marshall Plan" for education. Inner-city schools might well be, whatever their shortcomings, the ultimate safety net for young Blacks and Latinos.

WJW: Over the past several decades, ever since I read Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto*, I have been angry about what is happening to poor students of color in these schools. The atmosphere in many ghetto schools is deadening. What Clark said back in 1965 is still true today. Clark pointed out that kids in these ghetto schools "do not learn because they are not being taught effectively; and they are not being taught because those who are charged with the responsibility of teaching them do not believe that they can learn, do not expect that they can learn, and do not act toward them in ways that help them to learn."

Democrats have given lip service to improving public education but have not taken the necessary steps to address the problem seriously because teachers' unions overwhelmingly support Democratic candidates. In other words, Democrats have supported attempts to improve education as long as they preserve union power and influence. This was indeed the situation before Barack Obama became President of the United States and Arne Duncan, a brilliant and dedicated man who



...on average, a student who attended a charter school from the kindergarten to the eighth grade closed about 86 percent of the “Scarsdale-Harlem” achievement gap in math and 66 percent of the gap in English...

effectively fought teachers’ union restrictions in Chicago, was appointed Secretary of Education. Recognizing that for decades we have heard arguments about the need to reform urban public schools, including the need to diffuse high-performing public charter schools, Obama and Duncan moved in a different direction. As far as a “Marshall Plan,” don’t forget that their first move was to use some of the \$100 billion from the economic stimulus package for education to promote reforms in public schools.

SL: You’re very right on this last point. But let me explain my concern about Duncan’s rhetoric of “accountability.” The current administration might be right in reaffirming the need for accountability, but what is needed is accountability that monitors equitable funding, not teacher performance. The general philosophy, even more than during the Bush administration, is that “bad” teachers must be penalized and fired without restriction. As recent surveys in New York school districts illustrate, even teachers who apply state-of-the-art methods and accept merit pay are not omnipotent. They cannot address the most basic issues confronting underperforming poor students. I taught in public schools located in the marginalized banlieue for years before becoming a scholar, and this undertone of “blaming the teacher” bothers me.

WJW: It should not. There is a real problem here. As Arne Duncan pointed out to me when he was appointed CEO of the Chicago Public Schools by Mayor Daley, prior to his appointment as Secretary of Education in the Obama administration, many ghetto schools have become dumping grounds for the most incompetent teachers. What further angered me is that teachers’ unions—which are primarily committed to protecting teachers, even the most incompetent and undedicated teachers—have often blocked efforts at school reform that weaken union prerogatives. Accordingly, many incompetent, lazy, and undedicated teachers are safe in their jobs because they are protected by seniority and union rules. Meanwhile, many younger and often more dedicated teachers become frustrated because teachers are rewarded by seniority, not actual performance in the classroom, and drop out of the system altogether.

One of the ways Obama and Duncan put pressure on schools to reform was to increase competition among public schools—to make them more accountable by encouraging, among other things, the growth of public charter schools. And they had the leverage to effect change—tens of billions of dollars. They promptly informed the states that if any of them put a cap on

the growth of public charter schools, funds would be withheld. What charter schools have in common is that they are independent and fairly autonomous and therefore can pay teachers on the basis of performance or duties, as opposed to traditional pay scales that put the spotlight on seniority and credentials; and they all have an extended school day and a long school year. These federal education reforms therefore forced changes to the rules of engagement among teachers’ unions, school administrators, and state and local officials, and set the stage for the formation of broad-based coalitions that may yield tangible results.

SL: Look, some public charter schools in the ghettos of New York and Los Angeles or in the suburbs of Milwaukee do, it indeed seems, a remarkable job. Dedicated and well-paid teachers are able to work miracles with pupils previously denied any future. I admire and support Geoffrey Canada’s “cradle to grave” approach to education, and I fully understand President Obama when he seeks to replicate such comprehensive social services with “Promise Neighborhoods.” But when economists Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr., conclude in a 2009 study that the social programs in the Harlem Children’s Zone do not have a significant effect on student performance, I am confounded. Harlem and Chicago are famous for having become laboratories of educational policy. Social scientists find them a great site for free experimentation, but are they truly accountable?

WJW: Of course! Some public charter schools have proven to be quite efficient and accountable. Take the public charter schools in New York City. Caroline Hoxby, the Stanford economist, was the lead investigator in the study of the New York public charter schools. The distinctive feature of the study by Hoxby and her colleagues is that they were able to estimate the effects of the New York charter schools on achievement by using the “gold standard” method of lotteries. Better yet, because 94 percent of charter school students in New York City participated in a random lottery for school assignment, this method allows us to speak broadly about the overall performance of charter schools.

Hoxby and her colleagues found that, on average, a student who attended a charter school from the kindergarten to the eighth grade closed about 86 percent of the “Scarsdale-Harlem” achievement gap in math and 66 percent of the gap in English (with the “Scarsdale-Harlem” gap referring to the point spread between poor students of color in Harlem and White students in the affluent suburbs of New York). By contrast, the lottery losers

who remain in the traditional public schools stay at grade level, but only bring about minor reductions in the Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap.

SL: But what happens to traditional public schools, which will remain the norm and will have to accept those who cannot go anywhere else? Duncan's extensive reliance on charter schools brings up the following question: What do we do with the rest of the schools that face all the constraints but that benefit from none of the charter school assets?

WJW: This question, indeed a very good one, features the claim that public charter schools are pulling some of the better students from traditional public schools and leaving behind other students in subpar academic institutions. The answer to this question is that the creation of public charter schools puts pressure on traditional public schools to reform. This is clearly revealed in Boston, where the growth of successful public charter schools triggered a historic public education reform law. This law includes, among other things, a new pay-for-excellence plan that allows the Boston Public Schools to grant special rewards to exceptional teachers and grants principals in turnaround schools the authority to adopt schedules that best address the needs of the students and to choose the best teachers across the school district.

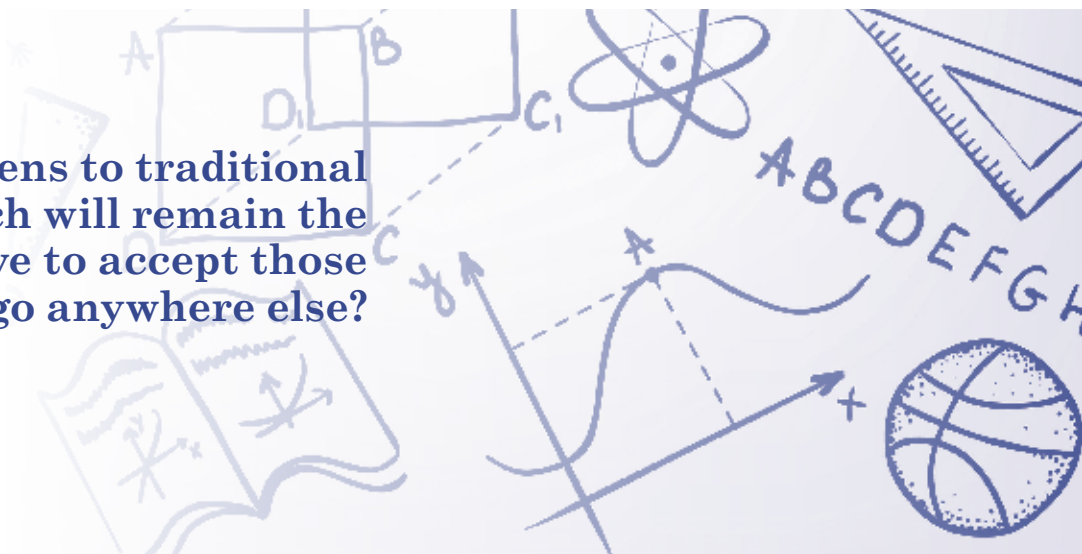
SL: That sounds nice in theory, but what happens in practice? Mayor Bloomberg and his former school superintendents Joel Klein and Cathleen Black in New York City shut down more than 100 schools in eight years. Or look at Washington, D.C., where Michelle Rhee, the former superintendent and chancellor, who was appointed by former mayor Adrian Fenty, pursued these policies for two years, closing schools she deemed "inefficient" and to be fighting union power. Rhee maintained that the best way to overhaul schools was to monitor the "performance" of teachers. She managed to snatch an agreement with teachers' unions in which they gave up job security and agreed to be evaluated in exchange for an increase of their wages. But this point-and-blame policy resulted in the dismissal of 241 of the 4,000 teachers, and 737 other instructors were put on notice with a "minimally effective" rating. Is this really what Obama and Duncan want to encourage?

WJW: Michelle Rhee got the Washington, D.C., Council to raise teacher salaries based not on traditional seniority protections, but on results in the classroom. Moreover, the accord provided for a "performance pay" system with \$20,000 to \$30,000 annual bonuses for teachers who meet certain standards, including growth in test scores. Prior to the introduction of this system, teachers were rarely dismissed because of poor performance. And prior to the introduction of this system, only 12 percent of the eighth graders in the Washington, D.C., public schools were reading at grade level, and fewer than half of the students were proficient on district math and reading tests. Yet nearly 95 percent of all teachers were rated "meets expectations" or higher.

Although Rhee eventually resigned following the defeat of Mayor Adrian Fenty, the innovative reform policies she introduced remain in place. In 2011, 16 percent of Washington, D.C., teachers received ratings of "highly effective" and were thus eligible to receive performance bonuses of up to \$25,000. Seven percent of these educators were rated highly effective for the second year in a row and, in addition to the annual bonuses, were eligible for base-salary increases of up to \$20,000. Sixty-nine percent received ratings of effective, nine percent were judged minimally effective for the first time, and about 200 teachers were dismissed either because they were rated minimally effective twice or because they received a rating of ineffective. Of the teachers who were rated minimally effective last year, and stayed in the system, more than half improved their ratings to either "effective" or "highly effective" in 2011. This is a great example of overcoming institutional entrenchment and finally making teachers accountable for the performance of students in the classroom. It is interesting to note that 80 percent of the teachers in the District of Columbia school system voted to pass the district contract that Rhee helped to put in place, a contract that was finalized after two-and-a-half years of negotiation with the Washington Teachers' Union.

SL: Your unconditional support of Rhee surprises me. Isn't top-down authoritarian decision-making doomed to alienate people? Even if you think that the pitiful state of Washington, D.C. schools demanded rigorous shock therapy, you cannot dismiss the feelings of voters (and particularly Black voters), as expressed in the

But what happens to traditional public schools, which will remain the norm and will have to accept those who cannot go anywhere else?



As civil rights leaders pointed out, no elected official who is serious about addressing academic inequality can deny that social and racial discrimination have to be addressed through strong education funding and reform.

most recent election. Mayor Fenty failed to win re-election! I appreciate that this election was not strictly a referendum on Rhee, but the majority of Black voters resented Rhee's reform. Interestingly, a Washington Post poll indicated that 54 percent of Black voters said they would not vote for Fenty because of Rhee, while 68 percent of Whites said Rhee's reforms were the reason they were voting for Fenty. It seems to me that the people of Washington expressed a desire to be heard. The same thing is happening in New Orleans right now, where angry African American parents and educators feel disenfranchised by what's happening to their public schools. Poor Black and Latino communities statewide probably don't think they need Ivy League-educated do-gooders telling families what is best for them. The practice of democracy in marginalized communities is at stake. People are not ignorant. If they cling to their public school, there is a reason that goes beyond test scores and the blame game.

WJW: Why did 54 percent of the Black voters in Washington, D.C., say they would not vote for Mayor Fenty because of Rhee? Your answer: "The truth is a majority of them resented Rhee's reform." I have an entirely different interpretation. They were not fully informed about Rhee's accomplishments. You can't make wise decisions if you don't have good information. As we have so clearly seen with the recent conservative Republican upsurge in the United States, public opinion can also be manipulated.

Black public opinion was effectively manipulated in Washington, D.C. Let me elaborate. Unfortunately, Mayor Adrian Fenty did not take the time to inform the Black community about Rhee's accomplishments and explain fully why he was so supportive of her. A former mayor of a large East Coast city told me that, in his opinion, this was Mayor Fenty's downfall. Fenty made little attempt to communicate directly with community leaders, ministers, and families in the Black neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., about Rhee's accomplishment and about the significant educational advances of African American students during her tenure. Mayor Fenty often discussed his accomplishments with business leaders, academics, and the editorial writers of the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*, but to his detriment, he did not go directly to the members of the Black community, even though he was urged to do so by some of the officials in his administration. Meanwhile, Vincent Gray,

who defeated Fenty in the Democratic primary, fanned throughout the Black community with his version and interpretation of Rhee's activities and accomplishments.

SL: When it comes to talking about race, what I see is that Rhee purposely ignored how poverty played out in most Black schools. When it comes to charter schools and the Obama-Duncan reforms, it seems we will have to agree to disagree. Countrywide, inner-city schools and poor suburban schools experience the most disproportionate school failure rates. As civil rights leaders pointed out, no elected official who is serious about addressing academic inequality can deny that social and racial discrimination have to be addressed through strong education funding and reform. Could the overrepresentation of charter schools in low-income and predominantly minority communities be the answer? Years ago, you suggested that in order to be publically tolerated, targeted social measures for Blacks and Latinos had to proceed in disguise. Educational policies and politics are so intertwined since Obama's election that I have to wonder: Is there, in your eyes, something close to a "hidden agenda" behind the reform that also explains your support of it?

WJW: As a progressive, I never thought that I would end up supporting such efforts at educational reform as the promotion of public charter schools and Obama's Race to the Top initiative. But I have become sick and tired of the miseducation of so many students in our public schools, especially students of color. Despite decades of federal support, public education continued to deteriorate primarily because such massive funding did not confront the problem of institutional entrenchment. Because of the Obama Administration, and the creative efforts of Secretary Arne Duncan, we finally have weapons to overcome institutional entrenchment. For the first time in my academic career, I am hopeful that the educational neglect of millions of disadvantaged students has a chance to be effectively addressed.

William Julius Wilson is Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor at Harvard University. Sylvie Laurent is a cultural historian, W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard University, and visiting fellow at Stanford University. She teaches at Sciences-Po and Columbia Reid Hall.