Betrayal: Accountability from the Bottom

Michelle Fine, Janice Bloom,
and Lori Chajet

Drawing on the voices of youth in New York and California, the authors find that the promises for improvement in current education policy represent a cruel hoax. Young people want a better education, but they are denied even the most basic conditions for learning.

Three days after taking office in January 2001, as the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush announced No Child Left Behind (NCLB), his framework for bipartisan education reform that he described as "the cornerstone of my administration." President Bush emphasized his deep belief in our public schools, but an even greater concern that "too many of our neediest children are being left behind. . . . The NCLB Act . . . incorporates principles and strategies includ[ing] increased accountability for states, school districts and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; more flexibility . . ." (U.S. Department of Education 2002, p. 1)

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Michelle Fine is a professor at the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). Janice Bloom and Lori Chajet are students at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Lori Chajet is a teacher at the East Side Community High School, New York City.

Are the President and the nation in a position to reach the stated goals of No Child Left Behind? This essay addresses this question through an accountability exercise. The authors join those who challenge the high-stakes standardized-testing implications of NCLB (Elmore 2002; Meier 2002), but in this essay we focus our concern on the NCLB promise of "choice" and "flexibility" to "our neediest children."

Drawing on data from poor and working-class youth of color from California and New York City, we analyze accountability from the "bottom." As you will read, these students yearn for a high-quality education. They believe deeply that they are entitled to a slice of the American dream. Yet they have been startled awake by their investigations into the quality of their education, as they recognize how public education in the United States has been redlined, with race, ethnicity, and class determining young people's access to high-quality schooling.

With the youth in these two contexts, we find the stated intent of NCLB – to support parents and students in low-performing schools – to be stunning and timely. Two of the Act's provisions, however, high-stakes testing and choice (specifically, the opportunity for students in low-performing schools to transfer to better-performing schools), reveal the cruel betrayal of NCLB for poor and working-class youth. For these students and their families, the language of "choice" rings brutally hollow. Systematic policies of inequitable urban school financing, maldistribution of quality teachers, and lack of access to rigorous curriculum ensure that the privileged remain privileged, while poor and working class students lag behind, all too predictably "failing" tests that seal their fates, with no choices in sight. "Choice" in this context sounds like an ideological diversion – a crumb held out to desperate students and parents whose real problem is underfunded schools (Kozol 1991).

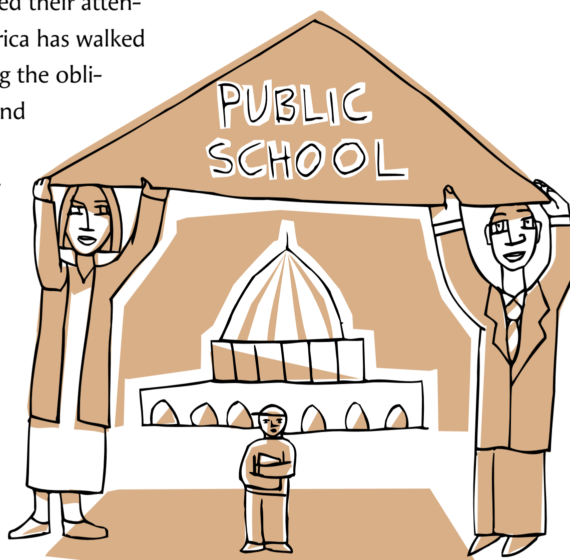
Economist Albert Hirschman (1990) theorizes that members of declining social organizations may engage in any of three psychological relations with

their organizations: exit, voice, or loyalty. In school systems plagued by structural inequities, most poor and working-class youth sadly, if understandably, *exit* prior to graduation (see Fine 1991). This was true before the introduction of high-stakes testing, and drop-out rates have dramatically spiked, especially in low-income communities of color (Fine & Powell 2001), since the tests have been put in place. Exit reigns in these schools, and those exiting have migrated into prisons, where 70 percent to 80 percent of young inmates have neither General Educational Development (GED) certificates nor high school diplomas (Fine et al. 2001). Some teens we've spoken with capture this trend as they see it: "There are two tracks now in high school – the college track and the prison track."

But the voices you will encounter in this essay are not voices of despair spoken by dropouts (another critical voice of accountability). Instead you will hear from students who have remained in underfunded schools, narrating a blend of yearning and betrayal, outrage and loyalty, the desire to believe and the pain of persistent inequities. Remaining loyal, in Hirschman's terms, these youth did *not* walk from their schools. It has not escaped their attention, however, that America has walked away from them, refusing the obligation to provide poor and working-class youth of color quality public education (Anyon 1997; Darling-Hammond 2001; Fine & Powell 2001; Kozol 1991; Mizell 2002; U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey 2000; U.S. Department of Labor 2001).

In such an America, any discussion of accountability requires a view from the bottom, told through the eyes of poor and working-class youth of color who want simply to be educated. We provide this view by bringing together college faculty, graduate students, teachers, and high school students, who work collectively to chronicle the uncomfortable truths of the accountability question (see Wells & Serna 1996 for parallel sets of issues concerning accountability and school integration).

You will hear, in this short essay, from high school students in two distinct settings. Across both settings, these young women and men are eloquent about the absence of *distributive justice*, that is, the unfair distribution of educational resources throughout America; and about the absence of *procedural justice*, that is, being refused a fair hearing from educators and the courts (Deutsch 2002). They ask: Will adults stand with them for educational justice? Theirs are necessary voices in the accountability debates.



The Hollowing of the Public Sphere: A Violation of Distributive and Procedural Justice

In the early 1990s, one of us (Michelle) wrote *Framing Dropouts* (Fine 1991), which analyzed the ways that public urban high schools systematically exile youths of poverty and color, scarring souls and minds in the process. This essay may sound redundant – an echo produced a decade later or an echo of W.E.B. DuBois's (1935) question "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?" almost seventy years later. But we believe, with concern, that the stakes for undereducated youth and for dropouts are far more severe today than they were in the past. For students of color and poor students, resources are woefully inadequate, access to higher education is increasingly low, and stakes for exclusion are rising. The economy remains hostile to young people without high school degrees (Poe-Yamagata & Jones 2000). Young women and men of color, even with high school degrees or some college, fare far worse than their white peers; those without a high school degree have little chance of entering the legitimate economy (Hochschild 1995, forthcoming).

The stakes for undereducated youth are far more severe today than they were in the past.

We situate this work in California and New York because these states perversely represent "cutting edge" states in which historic commitments to affirmative action (in California) and remediation (in New York) in higher education have been retrenched, wrenching generations of African Americans and Latinos out of even dreams of college and university (Hurtado, Haney & Garcia 1998). The public sphere of K–12 education has been hollowed; the academy has been bleached; the prison populations have swelled. California and New York, then, offer us an opportunity to ask how youth of color and poverty, now denied equal opportunity, assess the policies and practices of public education. These are perfect – if distressing – sites for reconceptualizing accountability from the bottom.

Denial and Alienation

Place: California

Context: Interviews with randomly selected youth who attend (or have graduated from) schools suffering from structural decay, high levels of unqualified educators, and/or absence of textbooks and instructional materials

Time: February 2002

"Every day, every hour, talented students are being sacrificed.... They're [the schools are] destroying lives."

—Maritza, college student, speaking about her urban high school

In *Williams v. State of California*, a class-action lawsuit has been waged on behalf of poor and working-class students attending structurally and instructionally underresourced schools in California in 2002. As the plaintiff's first amended complaint states:

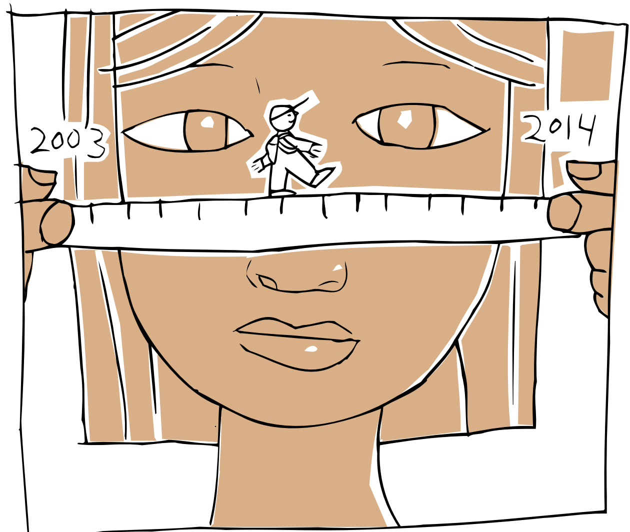
> Tens of thousands of children attending public schools located throughout the state of California are being deprived of basic educational opportunities available to more privileged children attending the majority of the state's public schools. State law requires students to attend school. Yet all too many California school children must go to schools that shock the conscience. Those schools lack the bare essentials required of a free and common school education that the majority of students throughout the state

> enjoy: trained teachers, necessary educational supplies, classrooms, even seats in classrooms and facilities that meet basic health and safety standards. Students must therefore attempt to learn without books and sometimes without any teachers, and in schools that lack functioning heating or air-conditioning systems, that lack sufficient numbers of functioning toilets, and that are infested with vermin, including rats, mice, and cockroaches. These appalling conditions in California public schools represent extreme departures from accepted educational standards and yet they have persisted for years and have worsened over time. (*Williams v. State of California* 2000)

As an expert witness in this case, one of us (Michelle) had the opportunity to organize extensive focus groups and conduct surveys in order to hear from over a hundred youths who attend schools in the plaintiff class about the impact of these conditions on their psychological, social, and academic well-being (see Fine, Burns, Payne & Torre 2002 for methodological design and findings).

Our qualitative and quantitative findings can be summarized simply: Children who attend structurally, fiscally, and educationally inadequate schools are not only miseducated, but they read conditions of resource-starved schools as evidence that the state and the nation view them as disposable and, simply, worthless (Fallis & Opotow 2002). Like children who learn to love in homes scarred by violence, they are forced to learn in contexts of humiliation, betrayal, and disrespect.

The youth in the California focus groups consistently told us that they want to be educated and intellectually challenged. They believe they deserve no less. They articulate, critically, two standards of accountability by which the state has failed them. First, they are



distressed about the lack of *material accountability* (fiscal, educational, and structural resources). And, second, they are outraged at the denial of *procedural accountability* (when they have complained to public authorities about their educational circumstances and needs, no one has responded).

Boy: "Because, before, we had a teacher for, like, the first three weeks of our multiculture class and then the teacher didn't have all her credentials so she couldn't continue to teach. And since then we've had, like, ten different substitutes. And none of them have taught us anything. We just basically do what we wanted in class. We wrote letters, all the class wrote letters to people and they never responded. We still don't have a teacher."

Girl (different focus group): "The teachers, they are there and then they are not there. One minute they're there, they're there for a whole week, and then they gone next week. And you try to find out where the teacher, and they say, 'We don't have a teacher.' We outside the whole day, you just sit outside because there ain't nobody going to come through. We ask the security guards to bring us the principal over there. They tell us to wait and they leave. And don't come back. They forget about us. We ain't getting no education by sitting outside."

"They forget about us. We ain't getting no education by sitting outside."

Students in another high school focus group became agitated as they contrasted how their schools ignored their requests for quality education but responded (if superficially) when the state investigated school policies and practices. As one student said:

> We all walked out, 'cause of the conditions, but they didn't care. They didn't even come out. They sent the police. The police made a line and pushed us back in. Don't you think the principal should have come out to hear what we were upset over? But when the state is coming in, they paint, they fix up the building. They don't care about us, the students, just the state or the city.

Scores of interviewed youth from California expressed this double experience of disappointment and betrayal. Disappointed by the relative absence of quality faculty and materials, they feel helpless to master rigorous academic material and powerless to solicit effective help. As if that were not enough, when these youth do complain, grieve, or challenge the educational inequities they endure, they confront a wall of silence, an institutional refusal to engage. Only 34 percent agreed or strongly agreed that "People like me have the ability to change government if we don't like what is happening."

On two fronts of accountability, the youth find the state lacking. These young people report high levels of perceived betrayal, resistance, and withdrawal by persons in positions of authority and public institutions (Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Perkins, Smith & Wanzer 2002). These schools not only deny youth academic skills. These schools produce alienation from the public sphere.

Aspiring to More

Place: New York City

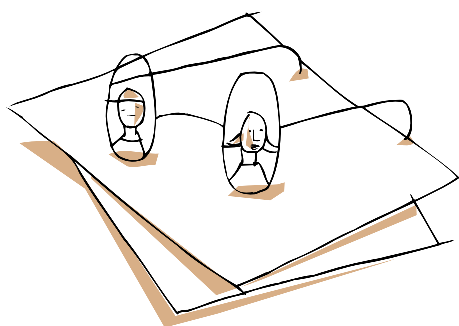
Context: Class discussion among seniors at small public high school in New York City – students are doing research on the issue of school funding in New York State

Time: September 2002

"If you're offering different things to different students in the city and suburbs, aren't you just segregating again?"
—Seekqumarie, high school senior

Young people report high levels of perceived betrayal, resistance, and withdrawal by persons in positions of authority. These schools produce alienation from the public sphere.

New York State is embroiled in a lawsuit, initiated in 1995 by a group of parents from New York City public schools who are represented by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE). CFE asserts that the state has failed to provide New York City's public school students with the "sound basic education" the state constitution promises all of its residents. This, it contends, is the result of antiquated funding formulas that grossly favor the suburban districts over the needier, urban ones. While some districts spend close to $13,000 per student, New York City – which educates 70 percent of the state's economically disadvantaged students, over 80 percent of its limited-English-proficient students, and 51 percent of its students with severe disabilities (Campaign for Fiscal Equity 2000; Education Priorities Panel 1999; *CFE v. State of New York* 2001) – spends only $9,623 per student (Regents and State Education Department 2001).



While the state's highest court considered an appeal of a lower court's decision on *CFE v. State of New York*, a group of seniors from one small public high school in New York City decided that they would study the origins, consequences, and persistence of financial inequities in New York State.

As youth researchers on the Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Opportunity Gap Research Project,[1] these students undertook a systematic analysis of fiscal equity policy documents; interviews with key informants (educators and policymakers on both sides of the debate); and a series of participant observations in elite suburban and poor urban schools. From within the city, the effects of inequitable funding were clear to the students. They regularly witnessed upwards of 50 percent of New York

1 This research is part of a project, funded by the Rockefeller, Spencer, Edwin Gould, and Leslie Glass foundations, on Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Educational Opportunity: Youth Research the "Achievement Gap." Our youth researcher colleagues include: Candice DeJesus, Emily Genao, Jasmine Castillo, Seekqumarie Kellman, Monica Jones, Lisa Sheare, Noman Rahman, Amanda Osorio, Jeremy Taylor, and Nikaury Acosta.

City high school students failing to graduate in four years and 30 percent never receiving a diploma at all (Campaign for Fiscal Equity 2000). At the start of the research, however, they had little sense of what "good" schools might look (and feel) like.

In this work, they ask two related questions: To what standards should they and their peers be held accountable? What must their government and the adults around them provide in order for them to reach those standards?

The researchers (two of us – Janice and Lori – and the youth researchers) began by reviewing key legislative and judicial documents. We read Justice Leland DeGrasse's 2001 decision:

> The court holds that the education provided New York City students is so deficient that it falls below the constitutional floor set by the Education Article of the New York State Constitution. The court also finds that the State's actions are a substantial cause of this constitutional violation.
>
> With respect to the plaintiff's claim under Title VI's implementing regulations, the court finds that the State school-funding system has an adverse and disparate impact on minority public school children and that this disparate impact is not adequately justified by any reason related to education. (*CFE v. State of New York* 2001)

Just seventeen months later, based on an appeal filed by Governor George Pataki, the Appellate Division overturned the DeGrasse decision. This court sided with the state's argument that a "sound basic education" – defined as an education whereby students learn to "function productively" and participate in civic duties such as serving on a jury and voting – is the equivalent of an eighth-grade education. We read, with dismay, Justice Alfred Lerner's decision:

> A "sound basic education" should consist of the skills necessary to obtain employment, and to competently discharge one's civil responsibility. The state submitted evidence that jury charges are generally at a grade level of 8.3, and newspaper articles on campaign and ballot issues range from grade level 6.5 to 11.7.... The evidence at the trial established that the skills required to enable a person to obtain employment, vote, and serve on a jury, are imparted between grades 8 and 9. (*CFE v. State of New York* 2002)

The court concluded, "That is not to say that the state should not strive for higher goals [than an eighth-grade education]; indeed...the new Regents standards...exceed any notions of a basic education" (*CFE v. State of New York* 2002).

Students were instantly struck by Judge Lerner's findings and by how disconnected they seem from the new requirement that all students must pass high-stakes five-test Regents for graduation, a mandate they have been hearing about, endlessly it seems, over the past several years. "If all schools have to

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give is an eighth- or ninth-grade education, why are they making us take the Regents?" one student asked, as the rest murmured their assent. These students recognize that they live at the heart of a policy paradox: a raising of standards required for a high school diploma, along with a declaration that the state has no responsibility to educate students to the levels required for a high school diploma. While this paradox may escape both politicians and policy-makers, it is felt deeply by the students upon whose heads it comes to rest.

Outraged at Lerner's suggestion that students need only an eighth- or ninth-grade education to succeed in today's economy, the students began a dialogue. One pointed out: "It cannot be said that a person who is engaged in a 'low-level service job' is not a valuable, productive member of society."

"That's true that they're valuable," others agreed, "but what kind of job can you get? Working at McDonald's?"

The question of the pay at a minimum-wage job came up – what exactly does one earn in a forty-hour week at $5.15 an hour? One student pulled out her calculator: $206. The numbers spoke for themselves. The students sat in silence, stunned by the future that a New York State Appellate Division judge is willing to consign them to.

The significance of resources in reaching "standards" (see also Orfield et al. 1997/2001) was clear to the students. Although they feel privileged to attend a small school with what they consider to be high academic standards, they are far from immune to the shortages that plague city schools. "If you have to take gym, then they have to give you a good gym. And you need books and computers if you're going to get ready for the Regents, or for a job, or anything." These most basic resources are not something that they take for granted; their school gym is a cause of much consternation at the school, barely large enough for one full-court basketball game. Though there is no shortage of books at their own school, one student recounted his experience in summer school, where his English class was unable to read a class book because there were not enough copies for all the students.

"You need books and computers if you're going to get ready for the Regents, or for a job, or anything."

"By not giving enough school-books or computers, some schools say, 'You're never going to amount to anything'. . . a child hears that and they say, 'Oh well. They say that's what I'm gonna do, that's what I'm gonna do.'"

Asked to construct a list of what constitutes a "sound basic education," they are expansive and recognize again the significance of material and intellectual resources. They include not only "the basics – math, English, science, history," but different languages, the arts, and a sophisticated political awareness. "You have to be able to form your own opinions about things: you need to know history in order to decide about current events," a young man explained. "How else can I decide if I think we should go to war with Iraq?"

Like the young people from California, they are aware that *someone* is supposed to be accountable for providing these resources equitably. As the race for governor of New York headed into its final stretch in the fall of 2002, they watched politicians keenly. One student pointed out, "I saw an ad last night on TV, where Governor Pataki says he has improved education in New York State. But how can he say that and appeal the decision?"

"What about the other candidate for governor?" someone else asked. "What is he going to do about education?"

"How do you know if the politicians are going to do what they say they will?" a third wondered.

In order to answer these and other questions, students went beyond legal documents to visit a series of suburban high schools – partner schools in the Opportunity Gap study – to investigate the material conditions of teaching and learning when most of the students are white and middle-class. Sitting on green grass waiting for their train back to the city, students expressed amazement at the differences between their own school and the large suburban complex they had spent the day visiting. "Did you see the auditorium? Okay, our auditorium

looks like...[crap] compared to that one. …"

"Because they have money, they could actually have a darkroom that they can do photography in," another exclaimed. Others focused on the library: "They have a lot of books!"

"It's like a regular library."

"The computers!"

One student highlighted the difference in access to technology within the classroom and its effect on student learning: "I went to [a science class where] a girl gave a presentation about abortion. She had slides to show everyone [on a slide projector and a computer]…when we had that in our school we just did a poster." Several, having also visited science classes, followed up with remarks on the "real" science laboratories: the lab equipment, the sinks in the rooms, the materials for experiments. It was clear, in their minds, that the students at this suburban school enjoy an academic advantage because of the resources they largely take for granted.

In noting structural inequities between suburbs and cities, these students nevertheless refuse to shrink from holding themselves and their peers to standards of accountability. Berating peers whom they see as not holding up their part of the bargain, they believe strongly in an ethic of individual responsibility. But they cannot ignore the many places where the state fails to provide the necessary resources: "By not giving enough schoolbooks or computers, some schools say, 'You're never going to amount to anything'…a child hears that and they say, 'Oh well. They say that's what I'm gonna do, that's what I'm gonna do.'" This young woman spoke, unknowingly, in an echo of the betrayal voiced by her peers in California.

From this work we begin to see not only a profound distress at the lack of public accountability, but the virus of mistrust spreading toward politicians, the state, and government in general. This generation has grown up without memory of a state that stood for the people, a social safety net, or a collective common sense of "we." They are a generation born into privatization of the public sphere and privatization of the soul. They are held accountable, but the state and the school system are off the hook.

The youth research on public education suggests a persuasive strategy for democratizing public accountability. In this work, the state and schools became the "subjects" of analysis, while youth developed the skills of researchers. In the process, however, poor and working-class youth collected much data to confirm (unfortunately) their suspicion that the "public" sphere is no longer designed for them, but on their backs. As poor and working-class students they may have felt betrayed; as researchers for public accountability of public education, they were outraged.

Demanding a Public Sphere

In the early part of the twenty-first century, social policies of financial inequity transform engaged and enthused students into young women and men who believe that the nation, adults, and the public sphere have abandoned and betrayed them, in the denial of quality education, democracy, and the promise of equality. They know that race, class, and ethnicity determine who receives, and who is denied, a rich public education. And they resent the silence they confront when they challenge these inequities.

In California, the interviewed youth attend schools where low expectations

and severe miseducation prevail. In New York, the youth researchers attend a school of vibrant educational possibility and high standards, despite severe financial inequities. In both cases, however, federal offers of "choice" and "flexibility" ring hollow and sound insincere. What are their choices? What flexibility can they exercise? In states and cities scarred by severe financial inequity and/or inadequacy, a discourse of choice thinly masks public betrayal. Such federal policy leaves most poor and working-class children behind.

Poor and working-class youth of color carry a keen and astute consciousness for accountability. They condemn financial inequity and educational redlining, and reject standardized testing as a valid assessment of their knowledge. They witness juvenile detention facilities being constructed in their neighborhoods, as public schools crumble and/or shut their doors. Most, as Hirschman would predict, exit high school prior to graduation. But those who stay are generous enough to offer us a powerful blend of possibility and outrage. Demanding accountability from the bottom, they ask only for a public sphere that represents the interests of all. They ask not for the choice to leave; nor for the opportunity to take a test that misrepresents memorization as learning. They want simply to be well educated, in their own communities, in their own well-funded and intellectually thrilling schools.

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