

Conventional Wisdom and Popular (Mis)Understanding of “Failing Schools”

Keith E. Benson¹

¹ Rutgers University-Camden & Camden Education Association, USA

Received: May 28, 2022

Accepted: July 20, 2022

Online Published: August 9, 2022

doi:10.5539/jel.v11n6p1

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v11n6p1>

Abstract

While the conception of “failing schools” has proliferated the American public’s (mis)understanding of performance of low-income urban public schools unabated since *A Nation at Risk*, education literature suggests “failing schools” are not what has been commonly described in conventional wisdom. Here, I begin by conceptualizing conventional wisdom before describing the popular narrative affixed to “failing schools” and briefly discussing the history of standardized assessments implemented to identify “failing schools”. And as the popular conception of “failing schools” position such schools as irredeemable education spaces as evidenced by students’ performance on standardized tests, in this article I attempt to posit a rebuttal to that conventional wisdom, namely that “failing schools” do not exist as isolated institutional sources of academic “failure” but are byproducts of longstanding economic and policy neglect of poor urban communities by policymakers, yet serve as convenient targets for the ultra-wealthy to divert popular attention away from systemic economic inequities which created illusion of “failing schools” to begin with.

Keywords: failing schools, urban education, education reform, conventional wisdom, popular narrative

1. Introduction

While popular conceptions of “failing schools” has been prevalent since the *Nation at Risk* (1983) held that American public education was so inept it posed a threat to the nation’s economic prosperity and national security, the acceptance of public schools, specifically urban public schools, as failing institutions gained widespread agreement across the American populace. Aided by fantastic Hollywood imagery, vast swaths of the American public accepted what “failing schools” look like aesthetically thanks to movie portrayals of chaotic urban schooling environments depicted in *Lean on Me* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *187* (1997) *Light it Up* (1999); but also as defined through legislation in the passage of *No Child Left Behind of 2001* (NCLB) where George Bush bemoaned the persistent “achievement gap” and later, through Obama’s *Race to the Top* of 2009. Obama’s *Race to the Top*, like Bush’s NCLB, isolates blame for underperforming students and “failing schools”, as evidenced primarily by their performance on standardized assessments, as a schoolhouse derived matter exclusively. Schools that exhibit poor scores on standardized assessments are deemed, “failing” and were often referenced pejoratively on both district report cards grading district public schools and in local media. As a result, long-standing popular assumptions morphed into conventional wisdom related to school performance and effectiveness, namely: students and schools are “failing” because of ineffective and apathetic teachers, lazy students, inefficient bureaucratic governmental operations, obstructionist teacher unions, weak curriculum, or some other building-based explanation.

For the better part of four decades influential parties forwarded the narrative of “failing schools” to great effect aided by popular media which established “failing schools” existence as a given among American citizens, as conventional wisdom. Identifying “failing schools” as the genesis of America’s economic and perceived educational stagnation has been standard fare for the political class and popular media to the extent that scant substantive pushback of the “failing schools” narrative exists outside academia or the education practitioner blogosphere. As such, the American populace’s blame for underperforming schools is overwhelmingly directed at school sites within poor urban communities already operating under strained conditions due to decades of neglectful policies and targeted disinvestment. Notwithstanding, the conventional wisdom pertaining to “failing schools” takes for granted that “failing schools” are, in fact, a real phenomenon that demand radical remediation and transformation as a prerequisite for greater economic opportunities for both lower-income students of color (Winters, 2019), and for a better economic outlook for the nation at large. But what if, rather than uncritically

accepting the conventional wisdom on school “failure” as caused by matters exclusively *within* the schoolhouse and the existence of “failing schools” as an actual entity, but instead, we contest the existence of “failing schools” as a reality to begin with? Why has the narrative of “failing schools” run so rampant throughout the better part of the last forty years to the extent the existence of “failing schools” rarely is challenged by policy makers and the broader public? In this article, I seek to use existing literature to explore conventional wisdom and society’s adopting of oft-repeated beliefs without challenge, before proposing contrary to conventional wisdom, “failing schools” as isolated institutions, do not exist, but are symptomatic of broader ecological and tertiary realities that negatively impacts educational outcomes prompting such schooling spaces to be popularly mislabeled as “failing”. Further, I attempt to position the popular narrative of “failing schools” that has come to be accepted as conventional wisdom, as a diversion by the wealthy and policymakers to direct the public’s attention on “failing schools” as convenient targets for blame for contemporary rampant, and growing, economic inequality.

2. Conventional Wisdom

The reflexive acceptance and proliferation of ideas due to their survivability and “common sense” nature is what is meant when the phrase “conventional wisdom” is deployed. Conventional wisdom exists across the vast spectrum of human observation from the relatively inconsequential like professional sports, to more consequential matters such as war and economics. Claims like, “in order to win a Superbowl (NFL), teams need a traditional drop-back, pocket-passing quarterback”, “having a team that is good at shooting three-pointers is the key to victory in today’s [basketball] game”, or “by government limiting corporate taxes and taxes on the wealthiest individuals, greater job creation, product innovation, and commercial spending will result thereby benefiting all sectors and participants in the economy” are examples of conventional wisdom. Such long-standing claims are common across sports and economics analysts and journalists and are met with comparatively minimal pushback despite a dearth of empirical research from which to substantiate the aforementioned claims. And even when data is presented contesting such arching narratives, popular claims still thrive within both common commentary and in the public consciousness. That is the impact of conventional wisdom.

The prevailing notion that increased economic productivity results in greater wholesale societal wealth, thus directly proportional, was guided by previous economic and political theories of inequality and scarcity in the post-WWII industrialized world (Lundberg, 2020). Conversely, Galbraith (1958) questioned the simultaneous and seemingly competing phenomena in the United States following WWII where both private and corporate wealth grew, yet the working-class and poor along with public sector investment from government intended to benefit common citizens, languished. Galbraith identifies the widespread acceptance of the correlative relationship between positive productivity and economic growth for the masses as an embodiment of, what he coined, “conventional wisdom” within economics and social development. To be sure, the existence of conventional wisdom is not limited to economics but apparent across an array of human endeavors and disciplines such as politics, sports, criminal justice, education, healthcare, and religion.

Conventional wisdom represents a set of ideas that are affirmed over time for their popular acceptability and commonplace nature among broad swaths of society. The ideas comprising conventional wisdom are so persistent within popular understanding, that pushing back against conventional wisdom or presenting competing ideas often results in high degrees of resistance from those who repeat and espouse such entrenched concepts. Additionally, conventional wisdom is generally understood to be commonly held and accepted beliefs as well as long-accepted opinions from experts within a given field or background. Indicators of the prevalence of conventional wisdom according to Galbraith (1958) and Bang and Frith (2017) are:

- Acceptance of ideas without questioning
- Not challenging information that fits within established normative thought
- Assuming thoughts of the majority are true because it seems “reasonable” and is based on long-standing tradition
- Rationale in favor of long-standing concepts is supported by widespread talking points

Hennessy (2014) asserts that conventional wisdom are theories that have been widely accepted to the extent they rarely undergo thorough scrutiny when put forward, but instead, are reflexively accepted as factual. As such, consideration of alternative perspectives is often shunned in favor of more traditional, intuitive concepts hinged on, largely, unresearched methodological approaches and a narrow set of already popular ideas (Reese & Rosenfeld, 2001). In large measure, conventional wisdom grows in its legitimacy through policymakers, media personalities, advocacy groups, think tanks and other organizations in positions of assumed authority that, seemingly in consensus, endorse the common knowledge (Hofman, 2002). The public learns to accept given ideas through news

media outlets, websites, and print media that convey the messages of official entities. Jensen et al. (2013) posit the spread of conventional wisdom, even if not fully accurate, spreads in media due to the competing goals of media and journalists who value definitive answers and eschew expressions of uncertainty and caveats. As the broader public, generally, are not well-versed or experts on the spectrum of topics covered in media, messages conveyed to the populace are easily adopted as factual while the public also remains unaware of competing arguments outside of what has been presented through popular media and word-of-mouth.

Popular media, particularly the “news” is a central actor in the proliferation of conventional wisdom and directing the understanding of issues amongst the populace. Vanderhicken (1995) asserts that the news media is a troubled institution in that it fails to do what the public believes it does in its portrayal of news. News coverage is not a conveyance of facts, but a series of communicated events displayed as crises that demand a response from decision-makers. As such, the media is an effective medium to manipulate public thought through its focus on conflict, individual personalities, and widely circulated talking points. Another critique of media as purveyors of news, outside that of news media not necessarily conveying complete or accurate information, is that media focuses too heavily on stories the public *wants* to consume, rather than what it needs to know; too much focus on personalities and process rather than what is happening, and why events are occurring (Anderson, 2008); and in turn, neglects substance and nuance for a public that has come to accept oversimplification and soundbites in acquiescence to adults’ shortened attention spans (Vanderhicken, 1995).

Critique of conventional wisdom spans academic disciplines and belief systems. In a 2016 study conducted at the University of Michigan on recent college graduates’ knowledge and acceptance of the ideals of the American Dream, findings illustrated younger respondents reported an apparent awareness of the American Dream, but also a growing realization that the conventional wisdom of “working hard and playing by the rules” is increasingly incongruous with achieving upward social mobility (Aronson, 2017). Still, the American Dream of achieving material and economic prosperity in America’s presumed egalitarian, meritocratic capitalist system remains a deep-seated belief among politicians and significant segments of the American public. Hofman (2002), in *Confronting the Tyranny of Conventional Wisdom*, confronts the pervasiveness of conventional wisdom within the healthcare industry pointing out that despite popular claims that new advancements in medical technology significantly lowers cost for treatment, it often does the opposite as implementation of most newer technologies results in higher, not lower, treatment costs. Similarly, Jensen et al. (2013) identifies the potential fallacy in the conventional wisdom that women at forty years old ought to receive annual mammograms to detect breast cancer, yet there is no consensus exists among specialists concerning the efficacy of annual screenings but many reports concerns about the health risks associated with receiving yearly mammograms beginning at forty. Within economics, conventional wisdom, and dominant neoliberal ideology positions human beings as that of customers who always act in their own best interest as rational actors (Blanchett & Richards, 2009). This persistent belief remains dogmatic within economic theory despite humans’ apparent complexities and tendencies to frequently do the opposite (Hennessy, 2018).

Pertaining to the popular discourse connected to education and educational attainment, the widely held belief is that schools are meritocratic spaces where student academic success yields a correlating benefit in career prospects and earnings. The idea, though intuitive, rests on the conventional wisdom that “education leads to skills, skills lead to employment, employment leads to growth, economic growth creates jobs and is the way out of poverty and inequality” (Klees, 2020, p. 12). This lasting concept, despite its vast acceptance among the American populace, has been a hindrance to addressing matters of poverty, inequality, and job availability as the responsibility to address such matters is placed at the feet of individual schools, teachers, and students and away from contemporary institutional structures that sustain inequity. Nonetheless, the conventional wisdom connecting personal economic and occupational attainment and effectiveness of schooling remains.

Extensive arguments decrying the efficacy of urban public schools are directly tied to student performance on standardized state assessments, graduation rates, advanced placement enrollment, student performance on SATs and ACTs, and college enrollment (Holme, 2012). Though the statistics in these areas between affluent suburban districts are comparatively dismal, they distract from broader ecological issues that initiated their existence. Largely disregarded with respect to “failing schools”, is that these institutions serve a predominantly socially and economically disadvantaged student body (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016; Spector & Kitsuse, 2017), and that the schools’ surrounding communities struggle with tertiary societal issues such as chronic unemployment, crime, residential segregation, and generational poverty that are independent of what takes place pedagogically inside the classroom (Reardon & Portilla, 2016; Benson, 2018). These coalescing realities within poorer communities do, however, negatively impact individual student achievement and, thus, school achievement in real and substantive ways. Still, public attention is directed at the low academic achievement within urban school districts as if children

grow up unimpacted and disconnected from their socioeconomic contexts, as many have been conditioned to believe that “excellent” teachers in “excellent” schools can sufficiently overcome the contexts in which poor students live and can place students on a path of economic prosperity and social mobility irrespective of their lived context (Weber, 2010; Hanauer, 2019). In the following section, I will challenge accepted conventional wisdom relating to the existence of “failing schools” by briefly discussing where the pejorative labeling of schools as “failing” initiated as well as describing the contexts wherein “failing schools” operate.

3. Failing Schools

Much has been researched on the causal relationship between the performance of public schools and its surrounding neighborhood (Anyon, 1996; Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Kozol, 1991; Fine, 1996). Students in affluent areas, generally, outperform their low SES counterparts in public education completion and standardized assessment performance. Minority urban youth, comparatively, do not perform as well academically as their suburban neighbors using traditional success indicators for a variety of non-school, poverty-related reasons (Kane et al., 2003). For example, poorer urban students are more likely to have a higher exposure to trauma, a reduction of cognitive development due to exposure to lead in paint and water within their residence, poorer diets, less access to quality healthcare, as well as a host of poverty-related health issues negatively impacting their schooling experience (Karande & Kulkarni, 2005). Additionally, many urban students are not prepared to enter school due to a shortage of preschools and early childhood enrichment programs and a growing technological divide between home and school (Taylor et al., 2013). Poorer children generally start their schooling at a disadvantage in terms of early skills, behaviors, and health. Typically, by the age of five fewer than ½ of poor students are “ready” for kindergarten compared to ¾ of children from middle and upper-class households, resulting in a twenty-seven percent point gap in achievement from the start of their education experience (Isaacs, 2012). Barkan writes, “The problem is not public schools; it is poverty. And as dozens of studies have shown, the gap in cognitive, physical, and social development between children in poverty and middle-class children is set by age three” (Barkan, 2011, p. 2). Thus, research suggests many problems plaguing performance outcomes of urban public schools, and their students are positively correlated with systemic urban policies coupled with historical and contemporary urban divestment and high poverty.

Policymakers’ and media outlets’ preoccupation with improving “failing schools” rarely attempts to identify, much less addresses powerful ecological factors and social contexts wherein schools labeled “failing” are situated. The “failing schools” terminology is reserved specifically for educational spaces attended by primarily low-income minority children from high-poverty neighborhoods. Some within education dismiss legitimacy in even acknowledging surrounding tertiary ills that mitigates students’ academic performance as evidenced by the emergence of “no excuses” charter schools in exclusively low-income communities - despite vast research linking academic performance of schools and individual students to their respective socioeconomic environments. Some argue that sustained decay and systemic divestment of large urban areas has more impact on educational outcomes, than all reforms and curriculum changes over the past thirty years (Fusarelli, 2011). Researchers have found that the single most-powerful predictor of racial gaps in educational achievement is the extent to which students attend schools with high concentrations of other low-income students (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). Additionally, Warren and Mapp (2011) point to a lack of political and social capital within the local community, along with prolonged poverty and racism further undermining students’ potential and development.

“Failing” urban schools are commonly painted as mammoth, inefficient government entities staffed by out-of-touch teachers, who are protected by self-serving teachers’ unions that put the desires of teachers before the needs of children. Popular media furthers the narrative that “failing schools” are ineffective by using standardized test scores as its primary source of, seemingly, objective proof. Knoester and Au (2015) notes standardized testing and conceptions of meritocracy, are tools of white supremacy and segregation in assigning value to students and schools based on race and class. Today’s mandated assessments students are rooted in intelligence quotient (IQ) testing and the eugenics movement of the early 1900s initiated by French psychologist Alfred Binet intended to measure the mental capacity of children with mental disabilities (Au, 2020). During WWI, IQ testing to assess the intelligence of military recruits began under the direction of American Psychologist Association president Robert Yerkes, along with Henry Goddard and Lewis Terman who established the Committee on Methods of Psychological Examination for Recruits (Shepherd, 2017; Greenwood, 2017), concluded military recruits’ performance on IQ tests correlated with skin pigmentation; those who performed better were lighter skinned Nordic Europeans from northern and western Europe, while recruits from southern and eastern Europe and with darker skin were less intelligent due to their comparative performance on IQ tests, with African-Americans were regarded as the least intelligent (Winfield, 2007; Knoester & Au, 2015). The result of the assessments administered to military recruits became grounds for calls to restrict immigration, race-mixing, and overt policies to keep

American white and Black races separate. In 1919, Terman, as a Stanford professor, altered the Army's standardized test for recruits to create the National Intelligence Test for prospective college students, a precursor of the modern Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) which has come under growing scrutiny for its constructed bias favoring affluent and white students (Kitter & Rosner, 2002).

Despite voluminous research indicating standardized tests' racist and classist roots which rank and sort students according to the linguistic norms of whiteness (Rector-Aranda, 2016), and the recognition that a litany of ecological factors outside the classroom impacts student performance in testing, standardized testing have been at the core of American education policy for the better part of two decades with modern presidents and governors positioning themselves as leaders in reforming public education (Morel, 2018). Policymakers' universal support for standardized assessments ignores broader research-based critiques against high-stakes testing: that test-taking itself is a skill disconnected from learned curricular content (Chittooran, 2001); leads to a "flattening of school curriculum" where what is prioritized in schools are tested subjects (language arts, literacy and math) at the expense of non-tested subjects like social studies, physical education, and the arts (Nichols & Berliner, 2005); often does not align with specific states' scope and sequence of courses leading students to be assessed based on content they have not yet covered (Popham, 1999; Kempf, 2016); and that urban schools specifically suffer most through enduring cuts to elective courses and extra-curricular programming with districts opting to provide more courses in tested subjects in efforts to stave off punitive interventions (Moore, 2005; Kempf, 2016).

Schools labeled "failing" or "in need of improvement" are reliably located in poor neighborhoods of color that struggle with prolonged poverty, crime, trauma, yet also lack needed institutional support such as access to mental health clinics, counseling, and therapy resources (Hursh, 2018). Such concepts concerning the relationship between schools and their environments are not new in urban education research. The Equality of Educational Opportunity (1966) report, commonly referred to as the "Coleman Report" concluded that the social context in which schools are situated, and the socioeconomic backgrounds of students attending schools impact student academic outcomes. Evans et al. (2011) writes, "childhood socioeconomic disadvantage leads to deficits in academic achievement and occupational attainment" (p. 21), while Kahlenberg (2013), Duncan et al. (2004), and Ludwig et al. (2001) suggest a school's social composition is not only highly impactful to academic achievement, but it is more influential to a student's academic performance than that student's own economic background.

The National Commission on Education Excellence, commissioned by the US Department of Education (USDOE) during the Reagan Administration drafted *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Reform* (1983) (ANAR) and concluded that America's position in the world as the preeminent power in industry, technology, and innovation was at risk due to its failure to sufficiently educate its children at the K-12 level. ANAR pointed to the lack of uniform, homogenized curriculum, the current "cafeteria-style curriculum" where students select classes based on their interest, and lack of standardized assessments as inhibitors to the nation's academic progress. The final ANAR report put forward curriculum recommendations for math, language, writing, and science-related subjects, and advocated for the adoption of national standards and increased standardized testing. In addition to assailing the state of American public education by linking America's position as an economic, military, and technology leader under threat due to the mediocrity of schools - though unproven (Guthrie & Springer, 2004), it also marked a shift in the governmental priorities and public expectations of public schooling away from being a societal good and public responsibility and toward a primary focus of preparing students for life in a global neoliberal economy (Brathwaite, 2016). Education for democracy, citizenship, and critical thinking became peripheral priorities in favor of corporatist edicts of efficiency, quantitative outputs, evaluations, and testing.

The popular impact and influence of the ANAR cannot be overstated in that it facilitated the recreating of public schooling more than any federal education guidelines since the US Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* (1954) decision mandating desegregation of America's public schools (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Not coincidentally, since ANAR's release in 1983, to the passage of NCLB in 2001, forty-nine states already administered standardized testing to chart school effectiveness through student performance on assessments (Au, 2020). Granting states twelve years to achieve universal proficiency for students in grades 3-8 and at least once between 10th and 12th grade by 2014, NCLB as a social policy imbeds racial formation around whiteness into a national movement of standardized testing where *whiteness* has a clear advantage in both the construction of tests as well as the policies attached to testing (Hursh, 2013; Moore, 2018). "Testing through neoliberal policies and reforms provided credence to state and city public legislators and officials about which schools should close or remain open, to receive limited public funding, particularly in Black and Brown areas where students often exhibited challenged assessment results" (Ali, 2019, p. 106). Many within the American populace concluded that schools that have students that perform well on assessments are the "good schools", while schools whose students score poorly on standardized tests are thus, deficient or "failing" and, justifiably, faced stark consequences including

teachers' loss of employment, surrendering of teacher certification, turnover of school staff, takeover of school buildings by charter operators, and outright district takeover.

While research on the fraught history and deficiencies of standardized testing as a metric of student learning is thoroughly explored in education research, measuring school effectiveness by student performance on standardized tests, however, has still gone largely uncontested by policymakers and the broader public as concepts like accountability, efficiency, and "failing schools" are packageable and intuitive. Arriving at conclusions, in some instances with steep consequences, about the efficacy of schooling environments based on the performance of students can lead many to misjudge how effective "failing schools" may actually be in educating students, as well misjudge how effective "good schools" are in educating their students. Downey et al. (2008), recommend adjusting how schools are evaluated from "achievement", evidenced by students' performance on exams, to that of "impact", indicating how much students learn while in school; ultimately concluding schools deemed "failing" based on test scores underestimate the effectiveness of "failing schools" in educating their students when measures are utilized that isolate school related and non-school related variables. Finally, applying Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) to better understand how students perceive their own urban high school deemed "failing", Benson concludes students attending "failing" schools find value in their maligned school sharing: schools are more than merely spaces to take exams and be assessed; their "failing school" has many caring, knowledgeable staff members and valuable mentoring programs that help students navigate difficult moments; students attending such schools are negatively prejudged and often have their scholastic accomplishments ignored by the broader public, and those who view their school to be "failing" are often individuals who have no regular connection to, or knowledge of, what their school truly offers (Benson, in press).

Throughout this section I attempted, albeit briefly, to describe the sociocultural context wherein "failing schools" are reliably situated. Contrary to conventional wisdom, "failing schools" are not isolated phenomenon but are the *indicators* of their ecological contexts and not the initiators of it, and that assessing the efficacy of poorer urban schools populated by low-income students through performance on mandated high-stakes standardized tests inherently disadvantages students and their schools, also connects to a racist eugenicist history that sought to identify non-whites as intellectually inferior. Finally, with policymakers and the popular public forwarding common assumptions about schools' quality based on test results, it warrants consideration that the prevailing conventional wisdom might be misjudging how effective "failing schools" actually are in educating students. In the next section, I will explore possible explanations for the proliferation of the "failing schools" narrative and the uncontested conventional wisdom of their existence.

4. The Proliferation of "Failing Schools" as Conventional Wisdom Aided by Policymakers and Wealthy Education Reformers

It is noteworthy that the emergence of the popular understanding of "failing schools", as defined by poor school and student performance on standardized tests primarily, coincided with the simultaneous rise of the education reform movement (Meyers & Murphy, 2007). For nearly forty years the language attached to how the public identifies and perceives "failing schools" has been chiefly molded by policymakers and education reformers who adhere to the efficacy of neoliberal, free-market approaches of assessment-based quantitative metrics, accountability (for falling short), and punitive consequences that has become dogma across our popular understanding (Coe & Kuttner, 2018). The failure of schools is the fault of schools, teachers, and students, exclusively, has become the dominant message and the master narrative—the conventional wisdom many have come to adopt without pushback believing There is No Alternative (TINA) explanation for school performance (Fisher-Ari et al., 2016).

The imperative to improve (or punish) school performance by focusing solely on the school site and not the contexts in which "failing schools" are situated, despite the voluminous research demonstrating the connectivity of both is not without consequence. Since the early 1990s "failing schools" constitute a convenient and tangible "whipping boy" for which policymakers can consistently blame for economic and policy failures that impact the daily lives of citizens (Cuban, 1991). Such lawmakers are also cognizant that conventional wisdom has already shaped popular thought about "failing schools" and the consequences of their existence. And, as policymakers typically have little connection with, or allegiance to, pejoratively viewed public schools as they, as well as their children more often than not, attend private schools or exclusive public education settings, perceived "failing schools" are often rendered voiceless to push back against attacks within legislative bodies or in the media (Moranto, 2005).

Additionally, while society at large has been primed to look to at schools as the spaces that cultivate both occupational opportunity for individuals as well as economic prosperity for the nation, policymakers' role in

shaping an economic reality where for all Americans: good-paying jobs are increasingly scarce (Schwietzer & Khattar, 2021); workplace precarity is growing more common (Kalleberg, 2009); the buying power of the American dollar continues to decline while corporate profits continue to soar (Economic Policy Institute, 2022), and wealth and income inequality in America surpassed that of the Gilded Age (Bivens et al., 2017), schooling and “poor” school performance reliably bears the blame. Amplifying the discourse of “failing schools” functions as an exercise in political expediency by which policymakers, rather than having to admit government, for generations, failed the urban poor, working class, and shrinking middle class to provide needed economic remediation and relief - and face justified criticism for it—policymakers instead, continue to avert public and legislative blame at the doors of “failing schools”.

Not coincidentally, the amplification of “failing schools” by policymakers overlaps in the messaging of wealthy education reformers who serve as both education advisors through their funded advocacy groups as well campaign contributors (Reckhow, 2013). The narrative of “failing schools” being forwarded by policymakers has been, in large measure, initiated and sustained by some of America’s ultra-wealthy billionaire class from both sides of the political spectrum. “The day before the first Democratic presidential debate in 2007, (Bill) Gates and (Eli) Broad announced they were jointly funding a \$60M campaign to get both political parties to address their foundations’ versions of education reform. The Gates-Broad money paid off...” (Barkan, 2011, p. 7). Dubbed the “biggest threat to public schools” (Lahm, 2016), both wealthy conservatives with connections to powerful energy corporations and the socially liberal connected to finance, real estate, and Big Tech propagate the virtues of neoliberal education reforms as an emergent response to “failing schools”. From investing in the proliferation of corporate operated charter schools and funding pro-charter candidates in local school board elections, to donating to legislators belonging to both major political parties to influence passage of pro-reform legislation and establishing think tanks that issue advocacy research to policymakers and news outlets, for decades, America’s billionaires like the Walton Family, Bill and Melinda Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Michael Bloomberg have demonstrated a vested interest in decrying the existence of “failing schools” as both real, and a problem warranting radical correction.

For ideological reasons, the principal funders of the education reform movement and forwarders of the dominant “failing school” narrative are ultra-rich billionaires across an array of corporate sectors who believe that public education should be treated by the government similar to that of a private commodity. Free markets principles that govern global and domestic corporations including deregulation, decentralization, accountability, and efficiency are approaches espoused by wealthy education reformers that, in their view, should be applied to public education as well. Charter schools, publicly-funded schools that are privately managed, are a reformist approach that accomplishes the governance desires and ideals of wealthy neoliberal adherents in, near exclusively, localities inhabited by low-income Black and Latino residents. With charter schools: boards of education seats that are typically filled by democratic elections are replaced with privately selected board members; operational government oversight is supplanted by guidelines set at the building level; power is concentrated with charter school operators and boards of trustee as over 90% of charter schools are un-unionized (Center for Education Reform, 2018) thereby rendering staff powerless in disputes as well as negotiations and collective bargaining; non-union affiliated education professionals are reduced to at-will employees, and charter schools operate outside the accountability to the local public. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of charter schools over the past thirty years, nearly universally coincides with the forced closure of traditional democratic public schools as evidenced in Detroit (Green et al., 2019), New Orleans (Carr, 2013), St. Louis (Delany, 2021), Chicago (Lipman, 2011), Indianapolis (Gabriel, 2022), Philadelphia (McWilliams & Kitzmiller, 2019), and Camden (Benson, 2019; Benson & Weiner, 2021). The shift in oversight from the public (school) to the private (charter school) is consequential from both an instructional standpoint as charter school educators have less professional experience, less certification, and shorter careers in education than their public education counterparts (Roch & Sai, 2016); and from a content standpoint where course content rests under the exclusive purview of charter operators—the consequences of which has been manifest across the country with some charter schools refusing to acknowledge the historical of the contributions and travails of Black Americans (The Griot, 2022) as well actively taking promoting ideological conservatism and Christianity within their schools (Aldrich, 2022; Otte, 2022).

Since the emergence of NCLB in 2001, billionaires primarily have funded the promotion of education reform and “failing schools” messaging across a variety of media outlets (Rutenberg, 2016), seemingly disconnected organizations, philanthropies, advocacy groups, and foundations, as well as campaigns of public officials from local board of education candidates to federal officeholders. The Network for Public Education issued an investigative report, *Hijacked by Billionaires: How the Super Rich Buy Elections to Undermine Public Schools* (2018) highlighting the involvement of ultra-rich education reformers in local school board races in locations far

from their own home residences. Reckhow (2013) conveys how education philanthropists exercise considerable and growing political influence on public education from the federal level down to the local level in identifying the dramatic shift in foundation dollars away from public schools after 2010 to charter schools, venture capital firms like NewSchools Venture Fund, and into local elections in support of pro-reform candidates; thereby allowing wealthy individuals to exert greater control over public education and the millions of students attending public schools. In highlighting the impact of news media's reliance on billionaire-funded think tanks for advocacy affirming the need for reform, and analysis on public education more generally, Berliner and Biddle (1995) argue the perception that Americans schools are in crisis has been fueled by well-funded conservative think tanks and a compliant media industry that not only does little fact-checking, but relies on primarily conservative think tanks to comment on education because of convenience. Further, in that Americans rely primarily on mass media as their primary source of information on matters ranging from trade to civil rights; national security to education, what the public learns to think about public education through the media and policymakers is shaped inordinately by conservative, pro-education reform think tanks like the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Department of Education Reform at University of Arkansas, Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, the Annenberg Institute at Brown University as well as the Manhattan Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Heritage Foundation (Haas, 2008; Reckhow, 2013).

The wealthy having, largely, the uncontested access to shape America's collective understanding of the state of public education and its perceived shortcomings, as well as cast domestic economic struggles embodied in poor job availability and the necessity for corporate offshoring as the result of an ineffective public education system rather than a decades-long adherence to neoliberal policies that valorizes maximizing corporate profits, benefits the wealthy who have seen their income soar 240% since 1979, compared to just 30% for the working class and the poor (Fieldhouse, 2013). Rising income inequality has become the normative condition in America according to Hacker and Pierson (2011) occurred due to, in large part, political drift exemplified in reduced labor protections and union affiliation, weakened collective bargaining, and the erosion of assurances of a true and meaningful minimum wage; this, while CEO pay soared 937% since 1978 with an average compensation ratio of 296-to-1 (typical worker) amounting to an average salary of \$24.8M, while typical worker pay grew just 10.2% (Mishel & Davis, 2015).

The unequal economic realities faced by the wealthy and average American is also evident in the wealthy's avoidance of paying taxes. The richest 400 Americans, all of whom earn more than \$110M a year according to ProPublica's 2021 report, *The Secret IRS Files: Trove of Never Before Seen Records Reveal How the Wealthiest Avoid Income Tax*, pay far lower income tax than the 21% percent earned on \$45,000 per year and the 26% earned on \$200,000 per year earned by middle class Americans. "Between 2014 and 2018 the twenty-five wealthiest Americans earned collectively \$401B but paid just \$13.6B in taxes amounting to just 3.4%" (Aratani, 2022, p. 1). The consequences of the wealthiest among Americans avoiding paying an equitable share in taxes to local, state, and the federal government amounts to losses of \$163B per year in revenue that would go to fund governmental functions, public services, including public schools (Dore, 2021). Ironically, some familiar names within the education reform atmosphere, are also chronically avoiding paying their fair share in taxes that could, conceivably, help improve the operating conditions of the "failing schools" they assail. Though earning \$2.1B a year since 2013, Michael Bloomberg managed to pay a tax rate of only 4.1%, while Mark Zuckerberg, despite being one of the richest men in the world pays a federal tax rate of only 13.7% (Elsinger et al., 2022). According to a report by Americans for Tax Fairness, between 2014-2018, Jeff Bezos of Amazon earned \$4.2B in income, yet paid only \$973M in income tax, a rate of 0.98%; Elon Musk of Tesla earned \$1.52B in income and paid \$455M in income tax, a rate of 3.27%; and billionaires Carl Icahn, George Soros and Michael Bloomberg managed to pay zero dollars in federal income tax multiple times between 2014 and 2018 (Americans for Tax Fairness, 2021).

While some of the wealthiest education reformers lobby for radical neoliberal reforms of "failing schools" and greater privatization of public education while avoiding paying taxes that could better fund learning environments for children nationwide, the Koch Brothers, Walton Family, John Arnold, Reed Hastings and others instead, opted to spend millions of dollars in donations to both politicians and advocacy think tanks that will push their reformist narrative and concentrate their authority over public education (Gott & Seidman, 2018). The effort of the wealthy to avoid paying their fair share in taxes while identifying "failing schools" as the problem plaguing both individual poor students' and America's economic outlook is an expression of educationism (Kuppens et al., 2018); that those with less education deserve less opportunity and proclaims education alone can ameliorate generational societal and economic injustice. Hanauer in, *Better Public Schools Won't Fix America* (2019) argues educationism ignores the reality that workers are underpaid and have been so for forty years and have seen little wage growth since 2000 despite being the most educated workforce because the economy is rigged against the average American in favor

of the wealthy (2019). Directing popular focus on school performance as defined by performance on standardized tests, serves to justify substantial inequities in occupational opportunity and economic power among the American populace, while diverting attention away from the rampant economic inequality which create and sustain “failing schools”, thereby benefiting the wealthy who propagated the “failing schools” narrative as conventional wisdom in the first place going back to ANAR.

5. Discussion

In efforts to keep this article focused on challenging the conventional wisdom of “failing schools” and briefly discussing the proliferation of the “failing school narrative”, I am acknowledging this topic could have gone in a myriad of directions not covered here. Critique of the business practices of wealthy education reform proponents who publicly decry “failing schools”, yet whose business practices contribute to income and health inequality that negatively impact poor children “failing schools”; conveying possible profit motives behind advocating for more privatization of education through charter schools, virtual charters (synchronous/asynchronous), corporate designed lesson plans and course material; discussing ideological stances of wealthy reform proponents that democracy is inefficient and, thus, should be circumvented in accordance to neoliberal philosophy are valid avenues for future inquiry that were not substantively addressed here but should be in future literature.

6. Conclusion

Since Galbraith first coined the term conventional wisdom nearly seventy years ago, the concept of its existence has both gained legitimacy in that conventional wisdom represents longstanding, popularly-accepted truths, yet contestation of conventional wisdom across an array of topics has become a topic of research onto itself. Common within the critique of conventional wisdom in literature is the idea that conventional wisdom often represents information that is incomplete or not truly accurate but is still widely held. Further, research on conventional wisdom puts forward how blind acceptance of conventional wisdom can be counterproductive to truly understanding perceived problems and their contexts, along with possible solutions. Conventional wisdom shaped by repetitive hearsay without pushback or critique coupled with widespread validation allows for its legitimacy to linger often uncontested. But sometimes conventional wisdom, in its reliance on long-held beliefs that largely go uninvestigated, gets it wrong.

For nearly forty years, the American public, thanks in large part to ANAR, NCLB, and Race to the Top, policymakers at all levels of government, emotive motion pictures, segments on national news and documentaries, and the ultra-wealthy convinced Americans that a weak public school system was the blame for the bulk of society’s ills, including a failing economy. The argument was “failing schools” were doing a poor job of educating students for today’s economy, and so to improve both the economy for our nation, and the economic prospects for children, “failing schools” needed to be targeted and radically remediated. “Failing schools” were identified by performance on standardized tests which to broad swaths of the public, made sense in their collective misunderstanding that standardized tests are not as objective as the public is led to believe, and has roots in racism and the eugenics movement. Still, “failing schools” and the conception of their existence is understood as a school-based matter; that schools “fail” primarily due to deficiencies within the building, including ineffective teachers and rigor-less curriculum.

The aim here was to explicitly challenge the acceptance of the conventional wisdom that “failing schools” are sites from which students’ economic and occupational inequalities generate; or are educative sites that are actually, “failing”. When considering vast education research that connects “failing schools” to their broader ecological context, we must begin to consider whether “failing schools” exist at all, and was our attention directed at “failing schools” an effort to keep the masses’ scorn diverted away from the rampant economic inequities between the wealthy and average American that created and sustained the mirage of “failing schools” altogether.

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Notes

Note 1. Readers can expect to see the terms “failing schools” and “failing” employed liberally throughout this article in that “failing schools” and “failing” are terms deployed in the public space by media and policymakers to describe “underperforming” schools. Additionally, “failing schools” are also referred, more technically as: schools in need of improvement, priority schools, low performing, etc.

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