

# COLLEGE AND SOCIAL CLASS

## The Broken Promise of America

**John Raines with Charles Brian McAdams**

**W**hen I walk into the room where I work, I know it is a class-room. I know by how it looks. There are individual chairs for the students, lined up facing the front, where there is a desk with a different kind of chair and a blackboard. What I am looking at is competition, hierarchy and an award system where only a few get the best (grades now, jobs later). What I am looking at is America, and the place where America reproduces class and class relations from one generation to the next. It is the room where I work, and the work that I do is called class.

I do not like that idea. I have progressive values. I like to think that I am teaching my students to seek and work for a fairer America, one more equal and effectively democratic. But my words, my sentiments and values, my book assignments—all these in the end are trumped by the structural function of education in our society, a function so clearly displayed but so seldom seen when we teachers walk into the room where we do our work with its hierarchy, competition, and winners and losers.

Education, we are told, is about opportunity. It is about young people gaining the skills needed to get ahead in the new post-industrial economy. Whether Republican or Democrat, our political leaders tell us that schools are the way into a brighter future. But what if that future is determined, in fact, by how jobs get constructed and distributed in the new global economy. And if that means that more and more good jobs are fleeing the older industrial countries, then schools in those countries are not about opportunity but instead function as

gate-keepers to a shrinking pool of rewards.

Even worse, what if the geography of success in school, and using schools for personal success, almost perfectly mirrors previously established patterns of relative class privilege? Then the function of education becomes not discovering new and deserving talent, but instead assigning desired future places in our society to the already privileged, and getting the losers to blame themselves rather than the injustices of social class.

What a terrible conclusion to reach for those of us motivated by progressive values. But I shall argue that statistics present us with precisely that grim picture, indeed a picture that has grown even more dim in recent years.

Let me use Pierre Bourdieu's famous word-play on "the said," "the unsaid" and "the unsayable." The *said of education* is that it is what makes America fair. At public expense (at least up to college) children are given a chance to discover and refine their innate talents. Individual merit overcomes the arbitrariness of birth and class position. The said of education can say even more. It can admit that we are not doing this very well right now, but that as a nation we are on a course of improvement. That is the said of education. It is what supposedly justifies my pay check.

The *unsaid of education* is that in terms of fairness and access, we are not doing better as a nation but worse. In the past thirty years the costs, especially of higher education, have persistently outpaced the rate of inflation; while state and federal support for college students has covered less and less of that cost.<sup>1</sup> Individual students and their families are forced to pick up the difference, or drop out, or never try in the first place. At the same time, well paying jobs with decent benefits require more and more years of education—a college degree today has become what a high school degree used to be in terms of leveraging future social position. Is this because the new jobs demand "more knowledge," or is it a way of pruning the pool of "deserving" applicants, and keeping that pool of the deserving proportional to the shrinking supply of decent jobs?

More years of education at greater personal expense inside a nation which since the 1970s has become steadily more unequal in terms of income and wealth—this is the grim picture that statistics paint. The unsaid of education is that the arbitrariness of birth and of class origin is today more and more important in terms of how life chances work out in our society. A promise America made is being broken and we educators administer that fact, even as we disguise it.

The *unsayable of education*—what Bourdieu calls "the heretical discourse"—is

that education is a side show, or worse a pantomime of the global class struggle, which has been and is being won by a ruling class that is more and more international in character, and everywhere remains a tiny minority. Talk of educational reform becomes, in that case, an ideological obfuscation that distracts attention from a worldwide class struggle where wealth and power have become steadily more concentrated. But this reality resides beyond the bounds of legitimate political discourse in our society, a dominant and dominating social reality that remains politically unacknowledged and unaddressed, a broken promise wrapped in silence.

I have claimed that statistics are the basis for the argument outlined here. What are some of those statistics?

We may begin with how wealth is distributed in our society, and how this has changed in the last thirty years since the beginning of de-industrialization. Then we can plot these wealth statistics against the income levels of the families of origin of those students who manage to graduate with a four-year college degree. Cross-referencing statistics of wealth with those of actual educational attainments will reveal how well the engine of equal opportunity, operating through schools, is working in our society, or how poorly! It will reveal how entrance into our social hierarchy is produced and reproduced from one generation to the next, and the role of education in that process.

Professional economists are agreed about the present geography of wealth, of personally owned entities of exchange value like money, stocks, houses, jewelry, and so on—although these same economists sharply disagree about the moral meaning of those statistics. The landscape of wealth looks like this. In 1980 the average CEO made 40 times the average worker in the same company. Today, twenty years later, the average CEO makes 400 times more than that average worker.<sup>2</sup> The Congressional Budget Office reports that from 1979 to 1997 the *after tax* income of the top one percent of families climbed by 157 percent, while in that same eighteen-year period middle-income Americans gained only 10 percent, and the poorest 20 percent now has debt that exceeds their assets. Today, 50 percent of the total national income goes to the richest 20 percent, while that same 20 percent get 83 percent of the country's total wealth (which, besides income, includes stocks and bonds and other private assets). That leaves just 17 percent of our nation's wealth for the remaining 80 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> Middle America has become a traffic jam of frustrated hopes with the result that our national politics has become the art of deflecting anger, where people decide to vote not for a candidate but *against* one.

Ever since the early 1970s when de-industrialization began to take hold of our economy, the secret to wealth depended upon being one of the winners in the new globalization scramble, a scramble where most are losers. For example, during the recession of 2001-2003 three million jobs were lost. The subsequent recovery has produced many new jobs, but with this startling reality. Those who found a new job, after losing their old one, have had to settle on average for a twenty-one percent pay cut.<sup>4</sup> For most, the recovery has not recovered the pay they once had. We live in a nation already vastly unequal and becoming more unequal with each passing year.

Why is it so hard to talk about social class in America? In my own field of religious studies, why is it our nation's libraries are filled with books about race and religion, about gender and religion but contain almost no books on religion and social class? It is, I think, because we are a society that persistently represents itself to itself as not having the frozen inequalities of established social class but are, instead, a society energized by individual opportunity. It almost seems un-American to talk about the things we are talking about here—as if proclaiming that America contradicts what America represents itself to be.

Even worse, to speak of such realities *as teachers* seems to make us traitors to our own calling. For that calling is to be emissaries of the promise and the dream, to make out of our classrooms places where hope is fed and America's kids begin to dream their futures into reality. It is not just the wealthy that want us to keep the secret mostly locked in social privilege. The poor too, or perhaps the poor especially, want us to pretend, want us to help them keep their children believing and trying! This puts us as teachers who are aware of persisting class inequalities into a profound contradiction of conscience. We want and need to think of our work in one way; but a systematic analysis of how power, privilege and schooling are inter-structured and interact in our country suggests a very different story, and not a happy story.

But I am getting ahead of the argument. I need to return to statistics, and only after that come back to the moral dilemmas of being teachers.

If we are a nation vastly unequal in terms of social class, then what is the relationship of class origin to eventual educational attainments? In 1979 students from the wealthiest families were four times more likely to have a bachelor's degree by age 24 than poor students. By 1994, fifteen years later, the wealthiest students were ten times more likely to have a degree.<sup>5</sup> What happened in those fifteen years was a triple whammy. First, post-industrial jobs began paying less. Second, tuition and related costs at colleges and universities consistently

outpaced inflation. Third, all during that time state and federal grants for college and university students not only paid less and less of the total costs but in fact declined more sharply precisely at those public institutions like Temple University where I work where some of the hard-working survivors of the class struggle are battling for their futures.

The federal Pell Grant awards (for low-income students) fell from covering eighty-four percent of costs in 1975/76 to only thirty-nine percent of costs in 2000.<sup>6</sup> The picture gets darker still. Even as the overall Pell grants in relation to costs were shrinking, more of those dollars were going to elite universities than to public institutions. According to the *New York Times*, “for every Pell dollar one of its students received in the 2000-2001 academic year . . . the median college got 7 cents while Harvard got 98 cents. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology got \$1.09 and Princeton got \$1.42.”<sup>7</sup> These three elite universities got between 15 and 20 times more Pell money per student than the median college and university. And these are elite institutions, already blessed with generous private endowments, which educate only 20 percent of our college graduates, with 80 percent graduating from public universities. In terms of federal dollars to support college and university students, the rich got richer and the rest got short-changed. Acknowledging upper class advantage, Harvard President Lawrence Summers recently pointed out that “only 10 percent of the students in elite higher education come from families in the lower half of the income distribution.” In fact, three-quarters of Harvard’s 1999 entering class came from families in the top one-quarter of income earners!<sup>8</sup>

Facing these realities, students from middle and working class and poor families responded in the only way they could—by getting jobs and/or going to school part-time. For many, this became a trap that ended their educational dreams. Statistics show that more than 30 percent of students working fifteen hours or more a week drop out of school, compared with 16 percent for those who work less than fifteen hours. And nearly *fifty* percent of students who attend college only part-time leave school, compared with *sixteen* percent of full-timers.<sup>9</sup>

I have been using statistics to talk about how social class privilege uses higher education to reproduce itself as a class and wall itself off from rivals in the class struggle. But most of the damage happens in the earlier years of education, with students dropping out of high school or, if finishing, not going on. Here is an example from close by Temple University where I teach. In the predominantly black and Latino Kensington High School (located in North Philadelphia),

out of the 477 freshman who entered in 1988, only 88 graduated four years later. And out of those 88 graduates, only eleven (about two percent of the entering class) entered into a four-year college program.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, at Lower Merion High School on the Philadelphia Mainline 94 percent of the graduates continued their education, with 86 percent attending four-year colleges or universities.<sup>11</sup> The chances of getting a college education were 40 times greater for Lower Merion graduates than for Kensington High. Nationally, two out of three high school students coming from the wealthiest one-quarter of American families enroll in a four-year college, while only one in five from the poorest one-quarter do. Put differently, at the nation's 146 most selective colleges, 74 percent come from the wealthiest one-fourth of families while only 3 percent come from the poorest one-fourth. Combining those figures with statistics of students having to work while going to college who subsequently drop out displays how the social order is replicated rather than changed by the very institutions that are supposed to make America fair.<sup>12</sup>

Whether it's getting into Harvard or just finishing a four-year degree at a state university, family income is a crucial variable. And for the working class and the poor, family income has barely kept up with inflation or has been shrinking.

Statistics paint a devastating picture for those of us who want to believe that education is helping America become more fair, less unequal, less stagnant in terms of class mobility. Whatever we wish to do as teachers, what we in fact do is to administer a process whereby a vast majority of students will either not finish high school, or if they do finish, will not go on to college. And of those special few who do succeed in starting college, many of these hard strivers will not succeed in finishing with a four-year college degree. Which is to say that the overall effect we have as educators, however unintended—indeed however anathema to our personal conscience—is to produce a student population of which a majority learn from an early age that they do not have “the right stuff.” They learn from our classrooms that they cannot entertain high expectations for their working lives, and must expect as adults to have others tower above them in the work place, telling them what to do. Success in our society replicates social class, and education does not so much modify that fact as disguise it by hiding it behind the myth of meritocracy.

But I can hear someone say, “Raines, keep your mouth shut!” I can hear someone say: “You're only undermining confidence in the last, best chance working class and poor kids have for getting ahead. And that chance is precise-

ly in those high school and public college classrooms—those places you poor-mouth!”

Exactly here, I think, is where the moral dilemma for us teachers becomes most fraught with difficulty and contradiction. And that is because it is true that the best chance in our society for lifetime success for poor and working-class kids is not the basketball court or the baseball or football field. It is right here, in the rooms where we work, a room called the class-room. What our students need, then, is a *better* “best chance,” a significant reform in how we administer and finance the education of students from poor and working class backgrounds. And I shall make some suggests to that end in a moment.

But the truth is that educational reform is only part, and the lesser part, of what we need for fairness in our society. What we mostly need is more *jobs that are good jobs*. And that means addressing the fundamental structures of global capitalism. Europe seems to be doing better at that than we are. Our politicians like to present themselves as being “family friendly.” But the truth is that family life in America today compares very poorly with what European countries do for families. Today, European workers take an average of six to seven weeks of vacation a year compared with the average of twelve days for workers in America. More ominous, two out of three American families with small children in which both parents work, work more than 80 hours a week.<sup>13</sup> That’s double the rate in Europe! Why? Is it because Americans prefer the extra money? Is it because of selfishness and a failure of family values on our part? No. It is because Americans have no choice. We have to sacrifice family time and leisure in order to pay for ever more expensive social necessities, like education and medical care, which in Europe are supported far more generously through government funding.

What accounts for this difference? I cited earlier the fact that in our country CEOs make 400 times the income of an average worker in the same company. Compare that to Great Britain, which is the most unequal country of our European counterparts, where the figure is 45 times the income rather than 400.<sup>14</sup> The difference between there and here is, fundamentally, a difference in consensus regarding the pursuit of individual wealth and its relationship to the obligation for social responsibility. Compared to Europe, social policy in this country tolerates a degree of inequality of wealth and vast differences in social services that are rejected as immoral on the other side of the Atlantic. The result is that, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, we are *clearly not a family friendly society*—unless your family occupies the top 20 percent of the wealth holders.

And that fact is not and cannot be addressed through better schools or more kids finishing college. It has to be addressed directly through national tax policies and what such revised policies would make possible in terms of a sharply increased social investment in education and medical care. But changing tax policies on the wealthy and moving to a national health care system are not easy political steps and, for the time being, perhaps not even possible. However, there is something already happening, something tested and proven.

In Raleigh, North Carolina and the surrounding Wake County, busing for racial integration has been conducted for years. But recently a new protocol has been added to the mix: economic integration—integration based on social class. Students from poorer neighborhoods are bused to schools where children from the more well-to-do used to be isolated in their privilege. The effect of this economic integration is a sharp increase in the test scores of the more disadvantaged children, while the test scores of the children of the more well-to-do remain the same. This is an approach that can and should be replicated at the local level around the nation. Since neither of the major political parties has made justice in social class relations part of their national agenda, perhaps our best chance for achieving the needed moral change is at the local level, local folks leading the way when those elected to represent us only pay lipservice to family values.

Here we teachers have something important to contribute. We can teach social class realities and how the American Dream has to embrace everyone in our country if it is to work for anyone, that as a nation we are bound together by a common destiny.

But I can hear someone say: “Raines, keep your criticism of our way of life to yourself, this demurring from the dream of individual success. All it does is make it more difficult for those struggling in the lower ranks of social class to get on with their lives. After all, they will have to live out those lives not after, but on this side of the revolution. And the dream of personal achievement may encourage them to keep trying!”

What can I say? What can any of us say? Maybe this:

Yes, it is true that we class-room teachers hold in our hands the hopes of every family in our nation. How well our classrooms work, and how well the students work in our classrooms will be the single most important variable in the future life chances of those students. That is, it is the single most important variable *if we factor out* the arbitrary unfairness of class origin. Important in understanding our role in that drama of unfairness is the fact that those of us who

work in public universities teach, besides the “lucky inheritors” (of relative class privilege) also that minority of “magnificent survivors” (of the less than privileged) who have managed to survive the class war being fought out daily in the elementary and middle and high school class-rooms of our country. And these magnificent survivors, who sit side by side with the lucky inheritors of our society, will soon become the leaders of this nation, where only twenty-seven percent of our population ever graduate from college. Somewhere in that future the increasing global inequalities, both within and between nations, will come to a point of implosion. And at that point some of our students, imbued with progressive values and a grasp on the injustices of social class, may find possibilities for a new politics opening before them, a progressive politics which today we cannot even imagine.

\* \* \*

This side of that future day of reckoning, there are important things we can do to increase access to and success in higher education in this country and thereby reduce the unfairness of how schooling gets done in America. I will confine my remarks to higher education, where the issues of access and success are less intractable. (But let us remember that the real “killing fields” of education are located earlier on).

We can begin with what looks like a promising state policy to increase class diversity in higher education, but is not.<sup>15</sup> Ten years ago the state of Georgia started the HOPE Scholarship program (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally). At first glance it looked like an excellent tool to increase access to higher education across social class divisions. The state of Georgia provides full tuition scholarships for a four-year degree to all students who attain a “B” average in High School and maintain that level in college. The money comes from the state lottery, and the level of funding is pegged to the public university system but can be used as partial payment for more expensive in-state private colleges. Today, there are ten other states, mostly in the South, who offer HOPE-like tuition plans.

Unfortunately, what looked like a promising way to increase class diversity in higher education has had, in fact, the opposite effect. A recent study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University concluded that,

while HOPE appears to have produced an overall increase in college attendance among Georgia youth, this increase was not shared equally among all Georgians. Higher-income youths were far more likely to

increase their schooling after the introduction of HOPE than those from lower income families. Using comparisons with other Southern state[s], we see that HOPE increased enrollment for youth from families with incomes above \$50,000 by 11.4 percentage points. By contrast, the program appears to have had no effect at all on the enrollments for Georgia youth from lower-income families.<sup>16</sup>

The basic problem is two-fold. HOPE is merit-based, not need-based, and in fact served to dry up need-based scholarship programs. And second, HOPE does nothing to address the class-based discrepancies in the quality of elementary and secondary school education. Instead of “leveling the field” of access, students from low-income families never got onto the field in the first place. Moreover, because the funding for HOPE comes from the notoriously regressive “hidden taxation” of the lottery, it means that poor people’s money is being transferred to the kids from better off families, and thus further cements in the advantages of social class.

If HOPE-like programs do not provide real hope, what is the way forward to increase access to higher education amongst those now so systematically excluded? The answer is both simple and complex. The simple part is that state and federal policies that would improve the educational chances of poor and working class children need to address that problem directly and exclusively. Need-based scholarships for higher education must be vastly expanded at the federal, state and local levels. Tax money, both federal and state, not lottery or gambling proceeds, must be its base, and the tax systems must be effectively progressive. The issue is money, and the money needs to come from better-off families to help the kids who, through the arbitrariness of birth, start out life disadvantaged.

But all of that is only the beginning. What poor and working class people need most are decent and secure jobs. A *dependable and adequate income* is the indispensable foundation of an educationally productive family and community. No amount of money directed at the remediation of poor schools can succeed where jobs for the parents are either not available or not decent in pay and benefits. And those jobs must be there not only for the parents but also for the children to aspire to in their turn.

So, here at the end of my argument I return again not to “the said” of education, or even to “the unsaid,” but to “the unsayable”—the heretical discourse. What happens in education is ultimately a side show if your concern is fairness in the way life chances play out in our country. We cannot collapse the eco-

conomic issues of our post-industrial and newly globalized economy into educational reform. The stark fact is this: as a nation we have each year for the past thirty years become more and more unequal in terms of both income and wealth, and by itself education cannot change that story. The reality of class struggle, and the winners and losers in that struggle, simply cannot be avoided.

The powerful and privileged may think it is in their best interest to keep this class struggle off the screen of public debate—a struggle which they are presently so systematically winning. But thinking that way needs to take a lesson from history. Nearly one hundred years ago the famous German sociologist Max Weber saw the problem of trying to use education as a tool to correct the inequalities of social class. Writing in 1914 Weber sounds eerily contemporary. He wrote: “When we hear from all sides the demand for an introduction of regular curricula and special examinations, the reason behind it is, of course, not a suddenly awakened ‘thirst for knowledge’ but the desire for restricting the supply for those positions and their monopolization by the owners of educational certificates. Today, the ‘examination’ is the universal means of monopolization.” Then to this education charade Weber adds the issue of social class: “As the education prerequisite to the acquisition of the educational certificate requires considerable expense and a period of waiting for full remuneration, this striving means a setback for talent in favor of property.”<sup>17</sup> One hundred years ago, education and the reproduction of social class had already become clandestine co-conspirators.

That was 1914.

But here is the earthquake lurking below the feet of our privileged class today. Twenty years after Weber wrote in 1914, Hitler rode class frustration and anger into political power in Germany. That is why today for those of us here in this country, the discourse on the widening inequalities of social class must vigorously enter our classrooms. Those rooms where we work must indeed and consciously become class-rooms, rooms where we teach about social class, about inequality and the betrayal of the American Promise. And our problem is that most of our students at the post-secondary level are already the lucky inheritors of that class struggle, which is also the case for we who are their teachers.

But perhaps we privileged students and teachers can be persuaded to listen. The reason is that whether well-to-do or working class or poor, we have together become a very powerful and, therefore, potentially a very dangerous nation. None of us, no matter what our social class location or aspirations should want that danger to explode as it did in Germany in 1934, where the stubborn advan-

tages of the wealthy few collided with the desperate hopes of the working class and the poor, and brought them not separately but together to a common ruin.

Whether the powerful and the privileged of our country—which is to say, most of our students and their families of origin as well as we who teach them—will be wise enough to see this danger and assent to its correction, only time will tell. Meanwhile, we who would be progressive teachers have our work to do, work that befits the room where we work, a room called class. In the face of the broken promise of America, WE CAN TEACH THE REALITIES OF SOCIAL CLASS.

## Notes

1. See “With less aid, college dreams slip away” by James M. O’Neill, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 9, 2002. Also, “Five Truths About Tuition” by Christopher Shea, *The New York Times*, Education Supplement, November 9, 2003.
2. See Edward N. Wolff, “Recent Trends in Wealth Ownership, 1983-1998,” available at [www.levy.org/docs/wrkpap/papers/300.html](http://www.levy.org/docs/wrkpap/papers/300.html). Also, “Uneven distribution more than just a game,” by Peter Simon in *The Telegraph Herald*, Dubuque, IA, Sept. 28, 2003.
3. See Wolff, *op. cit.* Also, U.S. Census Bureau, Table F-1 and F-3 at [www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/fo1.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/fo1.html) and [fo3.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/fo3.html). See also, “Are We Still a Middle-Class Nation?” by Michael Lind, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan./Feb. 2004.
4. See Lind, *op. cit.*
5. See O’Neill, *op. cit.* and also “The Tuition Crunch” by Jennifer Washburn, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan./Feb. 2004.
6. Washburn, *op. cit.*
7. See “Rich Colleges Receiving Richest Share of U.S. Aid,” by Greg Winter in *The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2003. For a more detailed survey of the realities of social class and the affect that has on educational attainments, see the three-week series in *The New York Times*, that began with a front-page story on May 15, 2005.
8. See “Harvard Says Poor Parents Won’t Have to Pay,” by Karen Arenson in *The New York Times*, Feb. 29, 2004.
9. See O’Neill *op. cit.*
10. “Their Pomp Defies the Circumstance,” in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 18, 1992.
11. From school’s Web site: [www.lmsd.org/schools/lowermerion/profile.pdf](http://www.lmsd.org/schools/lowermerion/profile.pdf).
12. See “Capital for College: Parental Assets and Postsecondary Schooling” in *Sociology of Education*, Jan. 2001, p. 68.
13. Statistics are from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and cited from “Time to Reevaluate Cost of Productivity,” by Joan Williams and Ariane Hegewisch in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 5, 2004, p. C3.
14. *Ibid.*
15. The research in this section was performed by Charles Brian McAdams.
16. Heller, D.E and Marin, P. (Eds.) *Who Should We Help? The negative consequences of merit scholarships*. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2002.
17. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. By Gerth and Mills, (New York: Oxford Un. Press, 1974), p.241.