Essay Question #1:
Proficiency, Differentiation, and Universal Education

Success For All (SFA), one of the leading comprehensive school reform programs, proclaims in its title the driving philosophy behind its intervention. *Every* child can and must achieve the same minimum level of success, first in reading proficiency and eventually, by way of improved literacy, across the entire range of academic subjects. A similar ideal is now embedded within the greater structure of the educational system, by way of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation which mandates nation-wide proficiency in English-Language Arts and Mathematics by 2014. Again, the theory is that a successful school is one in which all students perform at or above the same universal standard.

Neither the school-based SFA nor the federal NCLB presuppose that every student will follow an identical route to high achievement, but they agree that the correct response to individual student needs is the adaptation of school services, not standards. The tenets of this "proficiency model" of education are laid out especially clearly in SFA's promotional material: "The school must relentlessly stick with every child until that child is succeeding," write Robert Slavin and Nancy A. Madden. "If prevention is not enough, the child may need tutoring. If this is not enough, he or she may need help with behavior or attendance or eyeglasses. If this is not enough, he or she may need a modified approach to reading or other subjects. The school does not merely provide services to children, it constantly assesses the results of the services it provides and keeps varying or adding services until every child is successful" (Slavin and Madden 2001, p. 5). According to this proficiency-based philosophy, educational outcomes are what matter, and a school that varies its definition of success for individual students is not doing its job.

This vision of education stands in marked contrast to the model pushed by a series of educational reformers through much of the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, today's consensus around the "proficiency model" must be seen at least in part as the result of a widespread critique of the alternative "differentiation model" that rose to dominance during the Progressive Era and became increasingly embedded in the bureaucracy of educational governance. Encompassing the expansion of expansion of IQ testing, tracking, and the rise of vocational education, this system of differentiation and "scientific management" advocated flexibility in educational goals to take into account natural student limitations. The result, advocates of the proficiency model contend, has been the legitimation of vast achievement gaps, tending to fall along lines of race and class.

These criticisms bear an element of truth, and the turn toward the proficiency model is meaningful because it reframes the goals of schooling around a series of universal measures. Yet the strength of the proficiency model as a counter-discourse makes it easy to lose sight of the fact that it does not in and of itself 'solve' the problem of student difference. Rather, it provides an important way of thinking about educational equality but does little to ensure that high quality education will follow. If disadvantaged students today are to be given a meaningfully higher quality of education than in the past, it will not be sufficient to rely upon vague goals of universal proficiency. Instead, high standards will need to be linked directly to mechanisms that build school capacity, raising teaching quality in order to ensure meaningful gains for all students.

Foundations

Educational historians have documented a series of ways that schools and ideas about schooling shifted in the early part of the previous century, in response to both a vast wave of immigration as well as an increasingly rapid process of industrialization. Between 1870 and 1900, nearly 12 million immigrants arrived in the United States. The locus of the American population shifted equally fast, as cities grew to absorb their rural surroundings. By 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas for the first time. Between 1870 and 1900, enrollment in high schools increased more than 600 percent (Cohen and Neufeld 1981, p. 72). In the face of these changes, reformers turned increasingly to the school system as an institution that could help to mediate the difficulties of a changing society. What emerged from the tumult was a school system that served more students than ever before—both percentage-wise and in absolute terms—but also severely stratified its students, often along lines of race and class.

David Tyack, in *Managers of Virtue* and *The One Best System*, argues compellingly that many of the Progressive Era educational reforms can be attributed to a relatively small group of reformers that he names the "Educational Trust." The leaders of this movement—overwhelmingly male, white, and Anglo-Saxon Protestant—shared an ideology that linked a belief in social efficiency, corporate productivity, and scientific progress. In large part, this translated into a campaign suggesting that schools should adapt to take into account the limitations of different kinds of students. Tyack identifies this ideology in the text of a 1908 speech by Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, which suggested that schools "should be reorganized to serve each class 'with keen appreciation of the *several* ends in view [emphasis mine]'" (p. 129) as well as in William Ayres' *Laggards in Our Schools* study the following year, which explored the reasons behind certain student groups' "maladjustment" to an undifferentiated school system.[1] The view of schooling put forward by the members of the "Educational Trust," according to Tyack, intensified the focus on student differences, helping to raise support for a hierarchical system of schooling where testing and tracking determined the extent of student opportunity (Tyack 1974).

While the movement itself was not without dissenters, it propelled a definite shift in schools and curriculum. The elements of the model can be seen especially clearly in the increasing differentiation of high school tracks and general curricula. At the turn-of-the-century, most high schools offered only a college preparatory course of study for the students attending. By 1930, five out of six schools had expanded to offer commercial tracks, industrial tracks, and general tracks of study, all targeted to students who might not go onto college upon graduation. During the same set of decades, the number of high school courses expanded as well, with the average number of curricula doubling between 1906 and 1930 (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985, p. 246). Meanwhile, schools themselves fragmented, with special schools opening across urban districts to cater to special needs. And an industry developed around classifying types of students using the IQ tests developed to test army recruits during World War I.

Each of these developments in schooling shared an implicit orientation about the ways that schools could and should cope with differences in student abilities. Together they constitute what I have called the "differentiation model" of schooling. This model is premised on the idea

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[1] Eliot, who led the Committee of Ten, is often considered one of the leading proponents of a single-track education for all students. The fact that he too seems to have at least sometimes supported a more differentiated form of schooling supports Tyack's case for a growing consensus among Progressive Era educators.

that schools can never eliminate societal inequalities and so they would be foolish to push each student toward an arbitrary line that many cannot reach. Instead, schools should adjust their outcomes to their students, allowing each child to reach his or her individual potential.

Analyzing this model, some historians have argued that any democratic rhetoric that supported the differentiation model simply disguised its elitist roots, hiding the fact that the model was designed to protect the reformers' own privileged position within the system (see, for instance, Katz 1968 or Bowles and Gintis 1976). Whether or not the discrimination was purposeful, it is undeniably clear that the "scientific" classification and tracking that developed during the Progressive Era served to institutionalize an inequitable system of schooling. Jeff Mirel has documented the way this process played out in Detroit high schools, "depriving working-class and minority students of access to high-quality education" (Mirel 1999, p. 201). By 1966, the publication of the Coleman Report demonstrated with the utmost clarity that poor, black students tended to graduate high school with far lower educational outcomes than their white counterparts. As David Cohen has written, the "stratification of curriculum tracks along social and economic class lines restricted students' opportunities to socialize and helped to define serious studies as the business of more advantaged students" (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985, p. 254).

Evaluating Contemporary Interventions

It is in the greater context of the historical development of our school system that today's proficiency model (which I have located as a crucial element in both SFA and NCLB) must be understood. By suggesting that all students can reach a universal standard of proficiency, the new wave of educational interventions confronts head-on the stratification of the previous century of schooling. In a sense, the proficiency model advocates a return to the universal curriculum standards of the 19th century within the far more democratic, universal schools of the 21st century. There are clear advantages to this approach; a focus on a proficiency standard highlights current inequalities and creates a clear ethical standard that defines student underperformance as unacceptable. More generally, it might be seen as a political statement about the value of education for all students. Supporters of the proficiency model, however, tend to make more extravagant claims, implying that the shift in philosophy alone might have a large part to play in rectifying past inequities. President George W. Bush, for example, in a recent statement on the reauthorization of NCLB argued that "No Child Left Behind is helping to replace a culture of low expectations with a commitment to high achievement for all" (Bush 2007). The degree to which this is true, however, depends in large part upon the question of whether a shift toward universal proficiency also represents a shift toward high achievement. A number of developments cast doubt upon this possibility.

First, the proficiency model remains vulnerable to many of the criticisms that Progressive reformers raised against its previous incarnation a century ago. Universal standards of proficiency can only be meaningful for schools if the strictures are attainable within school walls. Otherwise, the process can be intensely demoralizing both for students and teachers in ways that actually damage the quality of programs within schools. As Douglas Harris has argued in a recently published critique of NCLB: "While setting the bar high may seem admirable and justified in order to help the most disadvantaged students catch up, it is more likely to be counterproductive by inducing schools to adopt poor practices and to avoid those practices that are likely to improve equity in the long term" (Harris 2007, p. 368). The problem, according to Harris, is that schools have no control over many of the issues that lower achievement levels for

disadvantaged students—issues ranging from poor nutrition to emotional conflict at home. Thus, since schools often cannot produce the necessary achievement gains, even the most successful programs centered around school learning can seem like apparent failures when a standard of universal proficiency is applied. Accountability measures mandating universal proficiency do not raise standards in these circumstances but instead induce schools toward policies that attempt to 'game the system,' as evidenced by the extensive documentation of teacher and student cheating under standards-based policies.

A separate though related issue concerns the difficulty of drawing the line of minimum proficiency at a sufficiently demanding level. In the best possible scenario, standards within proficiency-model interventions are set at a high level and teachers respond by pushing their students ever-higher. But it is equally likely that those responsible for creating the line of minimum proficiency (states in the case of NCLB, and private actors in the case of SFA) will follow the far easier route of lowering standards to attain universal proficiency. A number of researchers have documented this tendency in the implementation of NCLB. One recent study from the National Center for Education Statistics, for example, reported on the mismatch between state tests and the National Assessment for Educational Progress, finding that many states with apparently high levels of student proficiency actually have simply set less stringent standards on their respective tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). The issue is less apparent in a school-based intervention such as SFA, but it is no less important. SFA trains its teachers to push students toward high performance on its own specific assessments, and it seems to succeed fairly well by this standard. Researchers who have evaluated students on other standards, however, have tended to find less positive results, a sign that the SFA standards of proficiency are not necessarily all-inclusive.

The concerns raised above suggest that interventions based on the proficiency model cause types of abuses that the differentiation model avoids just as interventions based around a differentiation model raise a different set of issues. To some degree, the solution here might be to push toward a strategy that recognizes the legitimacy of both models. There is no fundamental reason why the proficiency and differentiation model need to stand in opposition to each other. In the case of NCLB, for example, policy debates have tended to focus on whether states should analyze test data by looking at students' absolute scores or their year-by-year gains. But once the mechanisms of data collection are in place, they will allow both types of analysis with little extra effort. Indeed, this seems to be the direction that policy-makers are already moving. Just last week, the Department of Education opened its two-year experiment with growth-model versions of accountability standards, based on the conclusion that "the first states to use those models in the project have shown it can be done without compromising the goals of the law" (Hoff 2007). The new version of the law still requires states to move schools toward proficiency by 2014, but it allows states to set year-by-year standards based on student growth. If this trend toward growth modeling continues, both within and outside NCLB, it seems promising. It is likely that accountability systems that highlight school progress using both absolute and gain measures might lead to more substantial improvements than either measure alone.

Ultimately, however, such a response sidesteps the true issue. What the historical analysis of the proficiency and differentiation models demonstrates is that the degree to which a school system pushes its students toward high levels of achievement is not solely dictated by the educational philosophy it asserts. Both the philosophy of proficiency and the philosophy of differentiation can spawn lofty rhetoric in the service of high expectations just as they can both fall prey to lowered standards. The degree to which interventions based on either of these

philosophies actually succeed in improving the quality of education for disadvantaged students seems to hinge not so much on the general stance the reform takes but on the specific ways it builds capability inside its schools.

One strand of evidence for this view derives from a comparison between SFA and the Accelerated Schools Project, another leading comprehensive school reform program. Both of these programs advertise themselves with a mantra of high standards for all students. The Accelerated Schools Project, however, goes even farther than SFA in making this mantra the definitive aspect of the intervention. According to ASP, the major task of the intervention is to give to staff, students, and community members a "unity of purpose" around the idea of high expectations for all students. Where SFA offers teachers highly specified lesson plans and teaching routines, ASP focuses on changing the culture and philosophy of its schools. An independent comparison of the two interventions found that ASP teachers could not be distinguished from teachers in the control group with regard to their instructional practices while SFA teachers actually seemed to have changed in ways that might make a difference to student learning (Correnti and Rowan, 2007). In other words, SFA's focus on the actual work of teaching as opposed to only the philosophy of teachers and school leaders had been necessary to create classroom changes.

Even with its set of teacher scripts and routines, however, SFA still has only been able to produce minor improvements in student achievement. To some degree, this failing is the result of aspects of the educational system that SFA is unable to control. Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James Wyckoff, for example, have documented the ways that "teacher sorting" takes place across New York State, leading to a predominance of less-qualified teachers in disadvantaged schools. In the authors' words, the schools "most in need of teachers who are able to increase the performance of students achieving at the lowest levels…systematically receive less qualified teachers than their suburban counterparts" (Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff 2002, 55). Thus, the practitioners who serve less-advantaged students often have lower levels of instructional knowledge than average even though they must achieve far more. Comprehensive school reforms like SFA are unable to overcome inborn weaknesses in their teaching forces and, so far, federal programs like NCLB have been unwilling to seriously take on this element of the problem. This is not an issue of proficiency or differentiation, it is a deeper problem of national priorities. Differentiation-based interventions over the past century bear the same blame on this count. Truly high standards require a teaching force that is well-trained in bringing students to high levels, and, throughout history, the teachers in disadvantaged schools have been far less qualified than their counterparts in highly performing schools. Unless this issue is addressed, even the most convincing rhetoric is unlikely to raise the quality of education for all students.

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