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The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890-1995. David L. Angus and Jeffrey E. Mirel. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999. 261 pp.

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University of California at Riverside

David Angus and Jeffrey Mirel have written an ambitious and wonderfully thought-provoking book: *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890-1995*. In a mere 259 pages, they sweep across more than one hundred years of schooling, giving particular attention to developments in curriculum. They review what policy makers have had to say about curriculum, they infer from their words their unspoken assumptions about valuable knowledge and its apt distribution across diverse students, and they consider the efficacy of the policies by comparing promised benefits and students' recorded course-taking experiences.

If this were not enough, the authors also assert an expansive reinterpretation of the high school's evolution, positioning their view against more familiar historical interpretations so that readers can readily grasp the fresh look they recommend. In a nutshell (and with apologies to David Tyack), their story might be subtitled *The One Best Curriculum*. Six substantive chapters, arranged chronologically, suggest that the promise of the American high school is that it will provide an equal educational opportunity for all students. However, the promise has failed, according to Angus and Mirel, because "professional educators" (also referred to as "Progressive educators," as "educationists," and as Arthur Bestor's "interlocking directorate of professional educationists") succeeded in defining equality as "meeting individual educational needs." Across the 20th century, that definition has been manifested in an increasingly differentiated curriculum that has displaced both academic excellence and purportedly comprehensive schools by exalting "practical," "relevant," and "nondisciplinary" knowledge; excising "traditional," "academic," and "rigorous" knowledge; and distributing the "watered-down" coursework mostly to socially disadvantaged students whom educators see as unable to learn while reserving the "high-status" knowledge for students lucky enough to be born into advantaged positions.

A more specific example of the authors' interesting reinterpretation can be drawn from chapter 3. There, the authors argue that the real transformation of the high school did *not* occur during the first three decades of the century, in line with Progressive ideals or struggles over whether its function would be academic or vocational. Rather, the transformation coincided with the Great Depression, beginning with the collapse in the late 1920s of the youth job market, propelled further by the competition and critique offered by New Deal programs, and later solidified by a postwar nostalgia for "normalcy." A transformed high school assumed a custodial function. The warehousing of youth in schools, and out of competition with adults for scarce jobs, was accomplished with a "life-

adjustment curriculum" focused on adolescents' immediate and personal needs rather than on their preparation for adult responsibilities, whether academically or vocationally.

In pointing to the moral of this story, Angus and Mirel align themselves with a tradition that they see stretching from 1890 and the Committee of 10 to Arthur Bestor, *A Nation at Risk,* and the contemporary movement for national standards. The moral is that an equal education can only be achieved if all students receive the same curriculum—and the one best curriculum should consist of "academic" "discipline-based," "high-status" knowledge.

The provocativeness of *The Failed Promise* lies in its sweep and unequivocal style, as well as in its data and analyses (which include "nested" data sets from national, state, urban, and city archives and cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of course taking by subject area families, track, gender, socioeconomic status, and race). Its limitations lie in these same qualities. *The Failed Promise* is short on the nuanced interpretation for which historical research, traditionally, is valued. Thus, the book describes but does not convincingly explain how we Americans persist in saying one thing while continuing to do another. At best, it points a finger at a kind of invincible, "educationist" conspiracy, even a juggernaut. Yet "Progressive educators" swam in the same stream we all swim in, and if they had plenty of blind spots, the traditional educators they critiqued were certainly not without their own. The cliometric, input-output model that Angus and Mirel use oversimplifies the U.S. paradox that any high school confronts: e pluribus unum. *The Failed Promise* posits curriculum differentiation unilaterally, as a practice that overemphasizes American individualism, freedom, and choice. However, union as well as uniqueness runs through American history, and the culture is both competitive *and* egalitarian. Therefore, schools not only embody individualism, they also use curriculum differentiation in service to the common good, equality, and tradition (Page 2000).

An example of this paradox appears in the black power movement of the late 1960s, which Angus and Mirel describe, albeit with little sympathy. The movement espoused a differentiated, Afrocentric curriculum as a means of honoring pedagogically significant differences in the black experience and, at the same time, as a mean of creating enhanced solidarity among African Americans, which also matters educationally. Tracking offers a similar complexity. Schools use it both to recognize each student's unique talents, interest, and aspirations, as Angus and Mirel suggest, and also to establish learning communities in which students have a chance to participate authentically.

As these comments indicate, I am not immediately convinced by the case *The Failed Promise* offers. If nothing else, diversity cannot be wished away, and "Progressive educators" cannot be scapegoated for failing to solve the American dilemma. However, my comments should also suggest that *The Failed Promise* provokes me to think about its case further. I will have that chance the next time I teach a course in curriculum history. Without question, *The Failed Promise* will be on the syllabus. In fact, I can imagine designing the course around the book.

I would ask students to delve into *The Failed Promise* on its own terms, to consider whether the data recorded in the extensive appendixes warrant the authors' interpretations (I noted some lack of correspondence in some cases) or how the necessarily brief renditions of texts, such as Conant's (1959) *The American High School Today,* illustrate the difficulties of historical translation and generalization. I would assign other histories to contextualize *The Failed Promise,* including some of the excellent treatments of vocational education (Kantor 1988; Kliebard 1999), the classic texts about Progressive education (Cremin 1961; Katz 1971; Kliebard 1995; Krug 1964, 1972; Mirel 1993; Tyack 1974), and broader intellectual and social histories such as Kammen's (1972) *People of Paradox* and Pole's (1993) *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*. These would direct students to theories of "America," their continuing historical fluctuations, and the fundamental importance of a comprehensive theory of "America" for adequate interpretations of curriculum and schooling. Finally, I would ask students to probe the all-too-brief discussion in *The Failed Promise* of a singular, "academic" curriculum as a means to equal education. Toward this end, I would add historical and contemporary analyses of curriculum practice and policy, especially studies that take readers into the proverbial smoke-filled rooms and into schoolrooms to document the complex diversity with which people make events and their meaning, using the resources their situations furnish them. It is a diversity public schools cannot ignore. I would assign Kliebard's (1999) *Schooled to Work,* which, like *The Failed Promise,* questions the instrumental value of vocational education but goes on to offer a compelling analysis of its symbolic impact. Even though vocational education didn't "work" as promised, it succeeded in "vocationalizing" our thinking so that, today, we conceive schooling principally as preparation for work but rarely as a process with its own real-time value and consequences. Linda McNeil's new book, *Contradictions of School Reform,* which documents the disastrous consequences of the current movement for standardization and testing in Texas, can also complicate thinking about the recommendations in *The Failed Promise*. These musings about my curriculum suggest that students and I will have our work cut out for us. They should also suggest that we will have Angus and Mirel to thank for it.

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