Learning from James Coleman

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WHEN James S. Coleman died in 1995, the headline in the New York Times obituary read "Work Helped to Foster Busing"—an interesting epitaph for someone whom many also considered to be one of the original neoconservatives. What Bayard Rustin said of the white working class applies with equal force to the eminent University of Chicago sociologist: "The question is not whether this group is liberal or conservative, for it is both."

At a time when Washington is talking about "common ground" on education, it is appropriate to revisit Coleman's uncommon thinking on the issue. The author of 30 books and numerous articles, many of which appeared in the pages of this journal, Coleman contributed mightily to our understanding of education in America. Spanning 35 years, his work has

This is the seventh in our occasional series of "Reconsiderations." Previous essays have examined the works of Louis Hartz, Richard M. Titmuss, Herbert Croly, Marshall McLuhan, Frederick Douglass, and Bertrand de Jouvenel.
much to say about the limitations of the education reforms under consideration, as well as the prospects for more promising, but less discussed, alternatives.

Coleman's sociological research ranged over a number of topics, from "social capital" to adolescent behavior. This article looks at three important contributions by Coleman to the education debate: *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, widely known as the Coleman Report, published in 1966; Coleman's study of school busing and white flight in the 1970s; and his research in the 1980s on the advantages of private schools. Several important principles emerge from this body of research: that social composition is more important than school spending, that socioeconomic integration is more important than racial integration, and that social capital of the sort found in Catholic schools is vital to improving our educational system. Taken together, these principles point toward reform of public education that transcends the conservative-liberal divide.

**The 1966 Coleman Report**

An obscure provision in the 1964 Civil Rights Act called for a study of inequality of opportunity in education "by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin." The general assumption of educators, indeed Coleman's assumption, was that the funding differences between black and white schools would be large, and that these differences would provide the central explanation for unequal achievements of blacks and whites. In 1966, after conducting what was then the second largest social science research project in history—involving 600,000 children in 4,000 schools nationally—Coleman and his colleagues issued *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. It became, according to journalist Nicholas Lemann, "probably the single best-known piece of quantitative social science in American history," and it contained a number of surprising findings. First, the disparities in funding between schools attended by blacks and whites were far smaller than anticipated. Second, funding was not closely related to achievement; family economic status was far more predictive. Third, a different kind of resource—peers—mattered a great deal. Going to school with middle-class peers was an advantage, while going to school
with lower-class peers was a disadvantage, above and beyond an individual's family circumstances.

Today, in public memory, Coleman's report has been largely reduced to the second proposition: that "family matters more than schooling" and that "education spending is unrelated to achievement." But while Coleman found that family background was the central explanation for student achievement, he also believed school inequality made things worse. In the Summer 1966 issue of *The Public Interest*, he noted that minority children start first grade behind white peers in reading and math achievement, on average, but they "have an even more serious deficiency at the end of school, which is obviously in part a result of the school." Harvard's Thomas Pettigrew noted: "Never once was it said that schools make no difference. The belief that Coleman hit was the belief that you could make a difference with money."

Although Coleman discovered that expenditures were not closely related to achievement, the report found that a student's achievement appears to be "strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students in the school.... Children from a given family background, when put in schools of different social compositions, will achieve at quite different levels." Writing in *The Public Interest*, Coleman was even more forceful: "The educational resources provided by a child's fellow students are more important for his achievement than are the resources provided by the school board." The Coleman Report concluded that "the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's own social background, than is any school factor."

The bad news, Coleman noted in the *Harvard Educational Review*, was that the characteristics that mattered least (facilities and curriculum) were the most equal between schools attended by blacks and schools attended by whites, while the factor that mattered most (the socioeconomic background of fellow students) was the most unequally distributed. The policy implications were obvious to Coleman: "The results clearly suggest that school integration across socioeconomic lines (and

† "Equal Schools or Equal Students?" *The Public Interest*, Number 4, Summer 1966.
hence across racial lines) will increase Negro achievement, and they throw serious doubt upon the effectiveness of policies designed to increase non-personal resources in the school."

The positive finding about the role of peers excited policy makers as much as the negative findings about spending disappointed them. In a free society, there are limits to what can be done to address inequality of opportunity that stems from family background. But it is appropriate to take steps to ensure that schools provide equal opportunity, for one of the purposes of education is to enable children to overcome the accident of parental social position. Thus, at the time of the Coleman Report’s publication, policy makers latched onto its evidence of the importance of a school’s social class mix.

In particular, Coleman’s discoveries were embraced and promoted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then a professor at Harvard. In the 1967-68 academic year, Moynihan organized a faculty seminar to analyze the Coleman Report and discuss its policy implications. The seminar proceedings were published in a collection edited by Moynihan and Frederick Mosteller, who summarized Coleman’s findings as follows: On the one hand, average per pupil expenditure accounted for less than 1 percent of the variance in educational achievement, “nothing approaching the assumed relationship”; on the other hand, “students mattered. The higher the social class of other students the higher any given student’s achievement.” In a 1967 interview, Moynihan noted that “the Coleman study makes a very strong case that equality of educational achievement in the American school system depends at least as much on who you go to school with as what kind of school you go to.... The big difference is the social class mix, and that really has nothing to do with the facilities as such.”

Critics pointed out that Coleman’s report was not longitudinal—it examined just a snapshot in time—and thus its conclusions might reflect what is known as self-selection bias: Blacks and low-income students in racially and economically integrated schools might just be more motivated than those in segregated schools. But numerous subsequent studies sought to correct for this bias, looking longitudinally at the growth in achievement over time, and confirmed that middle-class schools
provide a better educational environment than poverty-concentrated schools.

Learning by association

Coleman’s conclusion that peers mattered more than resources was considered shocking at the time, but it ultimately confirmed what most parents intuitively believe. Coleman noted that colleagues were at first surprised by the report’s findings, “but then they think back to their own educational experience and about the things they consider in trying to select a school for their children, and they realize what their own criteria are for ‘a good school.’ And they are no longer surprised.”

Coleman found that peers influenced learning in a number of ways. First, classmates influence each other’s aspirations: “Particular individuals who might never consider dropping out if they were in a different high school might decide to drop out if they attended a school where many boys and girls did so,” the Coleman Report noted. Because low-income children drop out at substantially higher rates than middle-class students, peer influence in a middle-class school has positive effects, on average. While we might like to think that the teacher sets the tone in a class, Coleman’s earlier research, published in Adolescent Society (1961), clearly established the primacy of peers. Coleman’s survey of 10 high schools found that students were 14 times as likely to say it was harder to accept the disapproval of peers than of teachers.

In addition, Coleman noted, the curriculum is likely to be more robust in middle-class schools than lower-income ones, creating a patent unfairness. “It is one thing to take as a given that approximately 70 percent of an entering high school freshman class will not attend college, but to assign a particular child to a curriculum designed for that 70 percent closes off for that child the opportunity to attend college.” Coleman was not concerned that low-income children would be overwhelmed in middle-class schools; while a more academically challenging environment could cause a certain amount of “trauma,” he said, the “psychological discomforts are not lasting.” Likewise, Coleman argued, predominantly low-income schools are much more likely to experience “enormous degrees of student disorder,” which inhibits education. In these schools, Coleman said,
“major attention is given to discipline rather than learning.”

Coleman also found that students learn vocabulary and other academic basics from one another, making it an advantage to attend school with students from well-educated backgrounds. For example, he observed, “going to school with other children whose vocabulary is larger than one’s own demands and creates a larger vocabulary.” Indeed, low-income kids enter school with a vocabulary about half the size of that of middle-class children. By analogy, Coleman said, just as an English-speaking child “will learn French more quickly in a classroom of French children than from the best French teacher,” a low-income child exposed to a middle-class environment will naturally expand his vocabulary. This economic assimilation, Coleman believed, was central to the purpose of public education. While it was true that standardized tests were biased in favor of middle-class culture, he wrote, “what they measure are the skills which are among the most important in our society for getting a good job and moving up to a better one.”

But if having middle-class peers is a positive influence on low-income children, might not the reverse also be true? Wouldn’t middle-class children be harmed by association with low-income children? Coleman claimed not: “The results indicate that heterogeneity of race and heterogeneity of family educational background can increase the achievement of children from weak educational backgrounds with no adverse effect on children from strong educational backgrounds.” How could this be the case? First, the Coleman Report found that low-income children were more affected by student environment than middle-class children. Integration was “asymmetric in its effects,” having “its greatest effect on those from educationally deficient backgrounds.” Blacks, for example, were twice as affected by school social environment as whites. Coleman explained that in middle-class families, aspirations and achievement were more firmly rooted because there was a greater likelihood of adult supervision; by contrast, in single-parent households, more time was spent with peers. Likewise, Coleman found, because middle-class children were, on average, learning a lot at home, the additional gains from peers and teachers were comparatively smaller than for lower-income children. The finding of differential sensitivity, wrote E.D. Hirsch,
“may be denominated ’Coleman’s Law,’” and it has been replicated in several subsequent studies.

Second, the Coleman Report suggested that there was a threshold or “tipping point” at which the negative effects of peer poverty become much greater. Numbers matter, in part because the numerical majority in a school sets the tone. As Coleman explained, “Cultural dominance of middle-class norms prevail in middle-class schools with a teacher teaching toward those standards and with students striving to maintain those standards. Conversely, in a predominantly lower-class school, standards prevail that are oftentimes antischool and that are oriented toward lack of performance or low performance in school.” He estimated that the threshold was around 60 percent middle class; that is, middle-class achievement would not decline in a 40 percent low-income school, but might at 50 percent and surely would at 90 percent.

Consider the issue of discipline. Coleman noted that “disorder clearly comes from lower-class schools.” In a school in which “70 or 80 percent of the children are undisciplined in their ordinary behavior pattern, then the values of the classroom are going to be undisciplined.” By contrast, the theory is that in predominantly middle-class schools, “children who themselves may be undisciplined, coming into classrooms that are highly disciplined, would take on the characteristics of their classmates and be governed by the norms of the classroom.” School discipline, he concluded, is “very much a function of the proportion of lower-class pupils in the classroom.”

Coleman’s research on this question has been ratified by numerous studies of racial desegregation. Even the most vocal opponents of busing agree that white scores did not decline with integration. David Armor, for example, noted in 1995 that “virtually all studies of desegregation and achievement have found little or no change in achievement or other educational outcomes for white students.”

Redefining equal opportunity

The other important contribution of the Coleman Report was conceptual. Coleman believed that equal educational opportunity should be redefined, so that it would no longer be measured by equal inputs—equal spending, teachers, and fa-
cilities. Rather, the focus would be on achieving academic results that were independent of family background. As Coleman wrote in *The Public Interest* in 1966, "Schools are successful only insofar as they reduce the dependence of a child's opportunities upon his social origins.... Thus equality of educational opportunity implies, not merely 'equal' schools, but equally effective schools, whose influences will overcome the differences in starting point of children from different social groups."

Returning to the theme in a 1967 *Public Interest* article, Coleman observed: "This is a task far more ambitious than has ever been attempted by any society: not just to offer, in a passive way, equal access to educational resources, but to provide an educational environment that will free a child's potentialities for learning from the inequalities imposed upon him by the accident of birth into one or another home and social environment."

As a practical matter, ensuring a healthy economic mix of students is considerably more challenging, politically and logistically, than writing government checks to provide more equality in financial resources. Many progressives continued to push for equal and compensatory spending, despite the Coleman Report's pessimistic findings on this score. In 1970, John Coons, William Clune, and Stephen Sugarman published a book, *Private Wealth and Public Education*, which argued that there is a constitutional right to equality in educational spending. Coleman wrote an introduction to the volume in which he praised its authors but also questioned their focus. The book's subject, "financial resources," left unaddressed "a second kind of educational resource, in the form of other children in a school," he wrote. Following the book's logic, but turning it toward a more ambitious goal, Coleman argued: "The educational resources available to each child in a school includes as an important component the educational backgrounds of the other children in the school—and any state which dictates the school or school district to which each child goes is unequally distributing those educational resources, however equally it is distributing financing."

That same year, testifying before the U.S. Senate Select

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1 "Toward Open Schools." *The Public Interest*, Number 9, Fall 1967.
Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, Coleman pointed out that disadvantaged students attending segregated schools are “deprived of the most effective educational resources contained in the schools: those brought by other children as a result of their home environment.” He also testified in support of integration in a Denver, Colorado, desegregation suit during that time period.

In 1972, Coleman sat for a rare interview to discuss a program in Duluth, Minnesota, designed to better integrate the school’s student population by economic status. He told the Saturday Review of Education that he was encouraged that Duluth officials were facing up to the new reality of residential segregation by class. Because of this segregation, conscious steps must be taken if we are to recreate “the common American school that was characteristic of our past and that is important to provide equal educational opportunities.” Coleman said that research continued to show that “a child’s performance, especially a working-class child’s performance, is greatly benefited by his going to a school with children who come from educationally stronger backgrounds.” Coleman declared flatly: “A child’s learning is a function more of the characteristics of his classmates than those of the teacher.”

**Race and busing**

The Coleman Report had suggested that the economic status of students in a school, rather than its racial makeup, was the key factor driving school quality. It concluded that the “beneficial effect of a student body with a high proportion of white students comes not from racial composition per se but from the better educational background and higher educational aspirations that are, on the average, found among whites.” The implication, Coleman noted, was that poor blacks and whites would benefit from attending middle-class white or black schools, and that poor blacks would not benefit academically from attending low-income white schools. This finding was replicated in subsequent studies, and was endorsed by Moynihan, among others, who in a 1967 interview urged that “we should begin to see that the underlying reality is not race but social class.”

However, in part for legal reasons, and in part for cultural
and political reasons, Coleman’s findings about the importance of the economic class of peers were translated into a discussion of racial integration. Brown v. Board of Education provided the legal basis for promoting integration by race, and the Constitution said nothing about integration by class. Relying on Coleman’s research, in 1967 the U.S. Civil Rights Commission issued a report entitled Racial Isolation, which called for legislation providing that no school be more than 50 percent black.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an explosion in school desegregation, as the Supreme Court lost patience with implementation of Brown by “all deliberate speed” and endorsed busing to desegregate schools. But the moment was short-lived, and in 1974 school desegregation was significantly curtailed by the Court’s decision in Milliken v. Bradley. Because the Court read Brown to apply only to de jure segregation, most suburban jurisdictions, not responsible for segregation in cities, would be exempt from desegregation orders. Around the same time, Coleman, who had become known as the “father of busing” because of the support the Coleman Report provided for a strategy of school integration over compensatory spending, began to raise serious questions about the policy.

First, Coleman’s research in the mid 1970s questioned the efficacy of forced racial busing when confined to urban districts. In 1975, he co-authored a report for the Urban Institute, Trends in School Segregation, 1968-73, which found that, because of the departure of white families, desegregation orders within a given district often had the effect of creating greater segregation between districts. Examining 19 cities, 8 of which had desegregation plans and 11 of which did not, Coleman found that while all the districts saw some white flight, those experiencing school desegregation saw white flight at four times the rate expected. “Ironically,” he wrote, “desegregation’ may be increasing segregation.”

Second, because Milliken exempted most suburban districts, racial desegregation orders, particularly in the North, often failed to promote the more educationally important byproduct of economic integration. In places like Boston, racial desegregation essentially involved integrating poor and working-class whites with poor and working-class blacks. Coleman noted that
because the plan "involved primarily lower-class communities ... with most of the higher-achieving middle-class schools in the suburbs," it was unlikely to yield "beneficial effects on achievement."

Because *Brown* was a "race" case rather than an "education" case—because it was geared toward rectifying the injustice of segregation rather than providing an optimal mix of students for educational purposes—desegregation orders were not designed to promote the majority middle-class environments that Coleman believed would raise achievement. Under some desegregation schemes, in fact, majority middle-class schools and overwhelmingly poor schools were integrated in a way that reduced the net number of schools that met Coleman's goal of a 60 percent middle-class student body. Under these conditions, Coleman noted, it was not surprising that middle-class families withdrew their children from newly desegregated, majority poor, public schools.

"The history of education since the industrial revolution," Coleman wrote, "shows a continual struggle between two forces: the desire by members of society to have educational opportunity for all children, and the desire of each family to provide the best education it can afford for its own students." So long as integration meant that more students would attend majority middle-class schools, the conflict might be elided: It was good for equal opportunity, and caused little, if any, academic harm to individual families. But the Constitution gave no heed to this sociological finding, and *Brown* did not guarantee a middle-class majority.

Many liberals saw Coleman's 1975 white-flight report as a betrayal and denounced Coleman as a racist. The president of the American Sociological Association sought to expel him as a member. (The effort was unsuccessful, and in the early 1990s, Coleman was chosen to be the association's president.) However, Coleman's opposition to busing did not mean he opposed integration efforts. Discussing his findings on busing in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1975, Coleman suggested an alternative: "I'd propose that each central-city child should have an entitlement from the state to attend any school in the metropolitan area outside his own district—with per pupil funds going with him." He further provided that suburban districts
shouldn’t be able to veto transfers; and that transfers be capped at 20 or 30 percent. Likewise, he proposed funding integrated schools at 150 percent the level of funding of non-integrated schools.

In a chapter for a 1981 book on school desegregation, Coleman reaffirmed the ideal of economically integrated schools, placing it at the center of our educational system. “American public education,” in contrast to European education, was “from its beginning a single system, founded on the ideology of a single ‘common school’ that children of all economic levels and all groups would attend.” Forced busing did not promote the common school, he argued, but policy makers should provide incentives to promote integration through magnet schools, urban-suburban school transfer programs like those found in Milwaukee, and portable funding, weighted to encourage integration in all directions. In lieu of busing, he argued for the principle “that every child has the full right and opportunity, unconstrained by residence or race or transportation costs, or by artificial school district boundaries, to attend the school of his or her choice.”

Coleman had grown increasingly convinced that school district lines were a barrier to equal opportunity and saw less and less reason to allow these artificial constructs to interfere with the movement of students. In 1978, he noted that because localities paid for less than half of the education bill, “the locality basis for education is increasingly undermined, and there is an increasing rationale for state or federal control over education.”

The Catholic school effect

In the third major phase of his education research, Coleman examined the benefit of attending private schools, particularly Catholic schools—another venture that seemingly confirmed his journey toward neoconservatism. Having found that compensatory spending didn’t work very well and that busing could foster white flight, Coleman now further cut his ties to progressives by concluding that private high schools did a better job of educating kids than public schools.

In 1982, Coleman and co-authors Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore published *High School Achievement: Public and Pri*
vate Schools, which found that Catholic high schools were both more integrated economically and racially and produced greater achievement than public schools. Comparing children of similar backgrounds, the authors discovered that students performed about one grade level higher in Catholic schools. Low-income and minority students in particular did better in Catholic schools than in public schools. The study was enormously controversial, and it came under heavy fire from a number of sources because it measured achievement at a single point in time, rather than achievement growth over time, and thus did not fully control for self-selection bias. Sure, low-income children in Catholic schools do better than low-income students in public schools, critics charged, but might that be the case because low-income children attending Catholic schools have particularly motivated parents, who cared enough about education to plunk down their own money—a factor that cannot be controlled for by using income statistics?

Coleman and Hoffer returned to this subject in their 1987 book Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities, which, tracking advances in student achievement over time, better addressed the question of self-selection bias. The longitudinal study found significant positive effects after controlling for income and initial achievement. Moreover, student achievement in Catholic high schools became less dependent on family background over time, in contrast to what takes place in public schools. “This suggests that the Catholic schools were functioning to diminish the effects of background,” Coleman and Hoffer wrote, “so that the Catholic schools more closely approximated the ‘common school’ ideal of American education than did the public (or the other private) schools.”

Coleman and Hoffer found that part of the reason poor children did better in Catholic schools was the peer effects that derive from the more economically advantaged backgrounds of their classmates. But they also found a residual effect, above and beyond this factor, and concluded that the approach of Catholic schools—the emphasis on high standards, better discipline, and greater parental involvement—better served the goal of raising the achievement of low-income children. Catholic school parents were almost twice as likely to have volunteered to help with fund-raising or school projects
as public school parents (46 percent versus 27 percent), and were more likely to attend parent-teacher conferences (56 percent versus 39 percent). Catholic school students were much less likely than public school students to report that students often cut class (16 percent versus 62 percent) or often didn’t obey teachers (15 percent versus 30 percent). Likewise, 72 percent of Catholic students were enrolled in an academic program (rather than a general or vocational program), compared with 36 percent in public schools.

Coleman and Hoffer also identified an additional factor that might have contributed to success in Catholic schools: the strong sense of community and shared mission, an idea that Coleman developed further in his influential writings on social capital. In a 1988 article in the American Journal of Sociology that became part of his monumental Foundations of Social Theory (1990), Coleman rejected the economist’s “extreme individualistic premises” and argued for the importance of “social capital,” a resource that springs from relations among people. Social capital can stem from relations within families, but Coleman also found that Catholic schools helped prevent high-school dropout in part because the “adult community surrounding the school” provided support to students.

Coleman’s “conservative” message about the efficacy of private schools was combined with a “progressive” conclusion: social institutions matter. While the Coleman Report emphasized the importance of socioeconomic background, Coleman’s new research demonstrated that institutions like Catholic schools can make an important difference. Coleman attempted to reconcile the two findings by noting that in the mid 1960s and the mid 1980s, there was a significant weakening of the influence of family relative to peers and other institutions as the number of single parents and working mothers soared.

**Beyond left and right**

What does all this say about current education debates? Today, most centrist educators and policy makers have embraced the movement for higher and more uniform academic standards, resisting concerns on the left about disparate impact on minorities and on the right about the specter of federal takeover. The key battle remains one between a liberal
emphasis on greater spending and a conservative emphasis on private school vouchers.

Progressives are generally far more sophisticated about their advocacy of education spending today than in the past, emphasizing specific programs like class-size reduction that many studies have shown to be effective. Yet calls for general increases in education spending remain a key part of progressive rhetoric, even as studies reporting the inefficacy of the federal Title I compensatory spending program continue to pile up. In one of his last acts as president, Bill Clinton issued Executive Order 13190, which created a new Presidential Commission on Educational Resource Equity. Announced on Martin Luther King Day as part of Clinton’s effort to help promote “One America,” the 13-member panel was designed to address “long standing gaps in access to educational resources,” particularly “disparities based on race and ethnicity.” A striking example of policy amnesia, the executive order pretends that the research that culminated in the Coleman Report—and subsequent confirmations of its findings—were never conducted. The focus on spending disparities by race seems particularly misplaced given the findings, cited in Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips’s 1998 book on The Black-White Test Score Gap, that “the average black child and the average white child now live in school districts that spend almost exactly the same amount per pupil”—$5,387 for blacks, $5,397 for whites.

The leading idea among conservatives is to provide public funds for private school vouchers, either as a targeted benefit for low-income children and children attending failing schools, or as a universal entitlement. Coleman’s research on the effectiveness of Catholic schools might seem to support a broad expansion of private school voucher programs. If Catholic schools do provide a “common school” environment and good academic results, then why not give more kids trapped in bad schools the chance to attend Catholic schools?

The problem is the classic one of going to scale. As long as Catholic schools are wholly private, they have the prerogative to reject the applications of students who they think will not meet academic standards. They can reject students who have a history of misbehaving (or expel those they’ve admitted who
prove troublesome), and they can feel confident that parents who are willing to reach into their own pockets to finance at least part of their children’s education are likely to be fairly active in the school. Some 70 percent of Catholic high schools require tests for admission, and the typical Catholic high school rejects 12 percent of applicants—not Andover standards, but not open admissions either. Also, many social scientists point out that even in areas where Catholic schools educate large numbers of poor children, the self-selected families that apply (and often pay some tuition) will more closely approximate middle-class public school families in values and culture.

Where publicly funded voucher programs are small, Catholic schools retain a competitive advantage over public schools serving similar demographic groups because it is a more motivated group that applies. Those small number of students who get in often do better than similarly motivated control groups who lose out in the lottery, but this result is unsurprising because the peers and parents in Catholic schools are still likely to be more motivated than peers and parents in public schools. More to the point, the small size of the program creates a potential problem: The much larger number of students in public schools who are left behind may be worse off because they are now surrounded by an even higher concentration of the least motivated peers and the least active parents.

A robust and widespread voucher program, in which failing public schools were closed down, and in which the vast majority of low-income students took advantage of vouchers, would address the “creaming” issue but also create a new set of problems. If, through widespread use of vouchers, low-income Catholic schools suddenly began taking very large numbers of low-income students by lottery, without screening them, and if, in order to qualify for public funding, parochial schools lost the ability to expel students who misbehave or fall behind academically, then these schools would likely come to resemble high-poverty public schools that are required to take all comers.

Of course, there are some nonselective, high-poverty public schools that, through the heroic work of dedicated principals, teachers, parents, and students, perform at high levels. The
Heritage Foundation recently issued a report in which the author "found not one or two [but] twenty-one high-poverty high performing schools." But these 21 schools stand in contrast with the 7,000 schools nationally that the Department of Education identifies as high-poverty and low-performing. The odds do not favor these schools, and it would be unwise to develop an education policy that depends upon heroic efforts.

**Recreating the common school**

So is it possible, on a national scale, to create schools that resemble Catholic schools in their high expectations, active parental involvement, and well-disciplined children? Well, one thing that American education has always done fairly well on a national scale is to provide a good education in majority middle-class schools. Viewed from this perspective, the Coleman Report of 1966 and Coleman's subsequent research on private schools are mutually reinforcing: Culture trumps expenditure. If it is true that Catholic schools approximate the culture found in middle-class public schools but are limited in number, why not instead give every student the chance to attend a middle-class public school?

This is just what school officials in La Crosse, Wisconsin, decided to do for their students in the early 1990s. Rather than desegregating schools by race, officials adopted the goal of a student population in each public school that is between 15 and 45 percent eligible for free lunch. This economic balance was implemented primarily by redrawing district lines and transporting students, rather than by parental choice.

The La Crosse experiment inspires a question: Why not marry the effort to promote economically integrated common schools with Coleman's support for greater public school choice? Schools in a given geographic area can take on special signatures (an emphasis on computers or on the arts, for example), in recognition that different children have different needs. Parents can have the chance to rank their preferences, and school officials can honor these choices in a way that also prevents isolation of students by economic class. To be sure, unregulated school choice might exacerbate economic segregation. But various steps could be taken, such as locating schools that appeal to the middle class in blue-collar neighborhoods,
to harness choice to promote integration. Majority middle-
class schools will make it much easier to achieve the first
three ingredients of Catholic school success—high standards,
active parental involvement, and good discipline. The use of
public school choice can add the fourth ingredient: the sense
of community that comes from a shared mission and set of
goals. This notion of a community based not on race or in-
come or geography but rather on shared ideas is fundamental
to the American experiment.

While the policy debate in Washington still centers on vouch-
ers and spending and other attempts to make "separate but
equal" work better, a few communities are beginning to take
up Coleman's emphasis on school integration over school spend-
ing; integration by class over integration by race; and public
school choice over forced busing. In the Wake County, North
Carolina, school district, which includes the city of Raleigh
and surrounding suburbs, school officials recently replaced a
racial integration plan with one that emphasizes economic sta-
tus. The county set a goal that no more than 40 percent of
students in any particular school should be eligible for free or
reduced price lunch, and no more than 25 percent should
read below grade level.

This new emphasis on integration by economic status also
answers the objection to racial integration voiced by Justice
Clarence Thomas in a 1995 desegregation case. "It never ceases
to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that
anything that is predominantly black must be inferior," he
wrote. Plans like those in La Crosse and Wake County recog-
nize that there is nothing magical about sitting next to kids
with white skin and that establishing a solidly middle-class
culture in all schools is the best hope for student success.

The debate over vouchers is likely to yield a compromise
that provides for greater public school choice. Conservatives
know that voucher ballot initiatives took a thumping in Cali-
forinia and Michigan during the 2000 election, and progressives
know that they must respond with something more immediate
than the promise to improve public schools over a generation.
Perhaps both sides can accept two premises advanced by
voucher proponents—that it is unfair to trap poor kids in bad
schools, and that it is good to provide more choice and com-
petition—but then apply these principles to public schools.

Coleman's research led the way toward this synthesis by uncovering the socioeconomic ingredients needed for successful public schools and by demonstrating that many private schools better approached the middle-class culture of the common school than high-poverty public schools themselves. The idea of recreating the American common school through public school choice is thoroughly American, and it is also quintessentially Colemanesque.