

The Need for Reform: A (Brief) History of Education Policy

A Nation at Risk, a report on the state of U.S. education, was published by the Reagan administration in 1983. The report claimed education was not as rigorous as it once was, inciting a fear that the U.S. would lose its status as a world leader.¹ (Years earlier) The 1960s had produced a variety of “alternative” education reform movements,² many inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, that pushed for equality in schooling and opportunities, for “child-centered” learning, and holistic and inquiry-based education.³ However, *A Nation at Risk* marked a turning point in education policy as the U.S. began “getting tough” on education through the federal enforcement of Zero Tolerance policies and curriculum standardization that restricted both student learning and teacher autonomy.⁴

Zero Tolerance policies are now viewed as an extension of the strict, harsh, and racially discriminatory policies that came out of the War on Drugs.⁵ They contribute to the punitive nature of some public school systems, which is one reason why parents may choose to enroll their children in an alternative school. Zero Tolerance policies were implemented during the 1990s to address school crime, even though school crime was on the decline. These policies often enforce mandatory punishments that fail to distinguish between the severity, circumstances, or context of school violations.⁶ Consequently, they are often applied to minor or nonviolent infractions and disproportionately target Black and Latino students who may be suspended, expelled, or arrested.⁷ Early alternative schools in urban cities, whether therapeutic or punitive, were seen as “last chance” opportunities for poor and minority “trouble” students who struggled academically or were targeted by Zero Tolerance policies in their public schools.⁸ On the other hand, alternative schools in majority White suburban areas were characterized as “innovative programs seeking to invent and pursue new ways to educate.”⁹ Today, these “innovative programs” commonly include charter schools, language immersion schools and programs, and magnet schools.

Standardization, or a standards-based curriculum, was seen as a “teacher proof” system of ensuring that all children—regardless of their socioeconomic privilege—would be taught the same material.”¹⁰ *A Nation of Risk* established standardization as precedent within education policy, and it has remained central to education reforms implemented by succeeding presidential administrations. In reality, standardization negatively impacted teachers and school administrations who were assessed based on student performance (their ability to meet national standards).¹¹ As recently as 2015, the standardization of the Common Core curriculum led many schools to require teachers to teach from scripted materials to “ensure [that] the same language

¹ Wendy A. Paterson, “From 1871 to 2021: A Short History of Education in the United States,” *Buffalo State University*, December 8, 2021, <https://suny.buffalostate.edu/news/1871-2021-short-history-education-united-states>.

² Mary Anne Raywid, “History and Issues of Alternative Schools,” *The Education Digest*, May 1999, ProQuest, 47.

³ Paterson, “From 1871 to 2021.”

⁴ Bettina Love, *Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal* (St. Martin’s Griffin, an imprint of St. Martin’s Publishing Group, 2023), 8.

⁵ Love, *Punished for Dreaming*, 7; Nancy A. Heitzeg, “Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline,” *Forum on Public Policy*, no. 2 (2009): 8, ERIC.

⁶ Heitzeg, “Education or Incarceration” 8-9.

⁷ Heitzeg, “Education or Incarceration,” 8.

⁸ Raywid, “History and Issues of Alternative Schools,” 47.

⁹ Raywid, “History and Issues of Alternative Schools,” 48.

¹⁰ Paterson, “From 1871 to 2021.”

¹¹ Paterson, “From 1871 to 2021.”

was used in every classroom.”¹² Subsequently, teachers across the nation reported having little to no time for subjects not covered by standardized tests, like art, music, and history,¹³ a result of what is often (and informally) referred to as ‘teaching to the test.’ Moreover, standardization also discriminated against students whose learning needs could not be met by standards-based teaching, and whose personal interests and diverse life experiences were not represented in the curriculum.

Recognizing the ways in which the American public school system has harmed and failed Black and minority students is necessary to achieve educational justice and “collective accountability and healing.”¹⁴ Efforts are ongoing to replace standard-based curricula with those that recognize the diversity of student experiences, and that center teaching practices and strategies, or pedagogies, that are racially liberatory, abolitionist, and culturally responsive and sustaining.

¹² Paterson, “From 1871 to 2021.”

¹³ Paterson, “From 1871 to 2021.”

¹⁴ Love, *Punished for Dreaming*, 13.

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