

Book Review

**Class Counts:
Education, Inequality, and the Shrinking Middle Class**
Allan Ornstein
Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007, 355 pages

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Allan Ornstein should be a familiar name to most school administrators since he is a prolific writer with several seminal textbooks on the market. His newest book, *Class Counts*, is in the author's own words, ". . . a 340-page ramble that my old handball, basketball, and baseball buddies might appreciate" (p. xi). Ornstein lists some of his old buddies from P.S. 42 who had no pedigree, legacy, or inherited wealth, power, or privilege. Some never achieved the American Dream; a few, however, went on to achieve solid middle class status. Ornstein points out that increasingly, one's social class may count more than their education level as people try to achieve the American Dream—hence the title.

Ornstein's thesis is that public education is no longer the engine of social and economic mobility. It is becoming more difficult to climb the ladder of success in our country. He cites the fact that in the last 15 years, real household income rose 2 percent for the bottom 90 percent of Americans, but rose 57 percent for the top 1 percent of wage earners. It soared 85 percent for the top 0.1 percent, and skyrocketed 112 percent for the top 0.01 percent! Given a similar economic outlook, Ornstein observes, most in his generation would be in much worse socioeconomic shape had they grown up and started their high school or college education today.

The author asserts that with increasing income disparities and inequality of educational opportunity, education is no longer society's "great equalizer." While America believes in social mobility—that one generation or individual can and should rise above the previous generation's or family's attainment level—facts show this is becoming more difficult. Only three percent of students attending the top 146 colleges and universities come from the bottom economic quartile, further exacerbating wealth and class gaps. Likewise, Ornstein cites statistics to show that income quintiles have "hardened," decreasing social mobility. Between 1979 and 2000 income gaps between the poor, middle class, and rich have increased. To put this into perspective, after-tax income for the richest one percent increased 201 percent. The middle quintile increased 15 percent while the bottom fifth increased only 9 percent.

This income inequality, Ornstein notes, is eroding public schools' role in producing the educated meritocracy. Instead, America's postindustrial economy is in danger of developing an aristocracy of inherited wealth. Schools can no longer equalize the social and cultural advantages that exist between social classes. With globalization driving down Wal-Mart prices and U.S. middle-class wages, the majority of

Americans are falling further behind the mobility curve. To bring it home: "What is the value of an education and what is happening to the middle class when a teacher can barely afford a bungalow, and some captain of industry, entertainer, or sports figure lives a more luxurious life than the land barons of the aristocratic Old World that we had hoped to eliminate in the New World" (p. 188)?

Ornstein begins *Class Counts* with a western civilization overview of social class, wealth, and inequality. His discussion extends from Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton to Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush. Class distinctions, Ornstein argues, are not new. Our founding fathers debated this topic. They asked: Should the country be run by an aristocracy of the bright and wealthy or by the general masses that did not even understand the debate's abstractions? The founders finally agreed that America's hope rested with an educated populace.

While the U.S. never lost its social class distinctions, America embraced the idea of equality under the law to pursue property, life, and liberty. The American Revolution gave the common man a new pride and power, new opportunities, and multiple chances to succeed. This provided a new respect for talent, hard work, and merit. Hence, ordinary Americans came to believe that everyone was the same as everyone else and everyone had equal opportunity to achieve the American dream.

Class Counts shows how tax policies since the Reagan administration have benefited the wealthiest Americans to a much greater extent than the rest of the population. A plethora of statistics demonstrates how such policies have exacerbated wealth gaps, excluding many from the prosperity many see but can not attain.

The author offers a final chapter on recommendations and solutions in *Class Counts*. Most

involve restructuring Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, healthcare, college tuition, and tax structures. For educators, he encourages using a more relevant, globalized curriculum and reminders to become informed voters (and vote for individuals who will accomplish necessary societal changes).

What does this mean for educators? Ornstein argues that most educators believe in "equal opportunity" and see school as a process involving the acquisition of skills and the inculcation of better work habits in order to increase the individual's productivity. Since income is related to productivity, more education brings higher income. Education also serves as a screening device to sort individuals into different jobs. The more talented and highly-educated individuals will obtain better jobs. "The resulting stratification, based on merit or performance, is acceptable to most of us in a democratic society" (p. 175).

The democratic system breaks down, however, when inherited wealth becomes entrenched and when the gap between the wealthy and unwealthy (*with similar amounts of education*) increasingly becomes lopsided. As "the relationship between education and income diminishes—and class, rank, and privilege increasingly outweigh talent, ability, and performance" (p. 175), Ornstein implies that public schools become less an engine for meritocracy or social mobility.

"Most of us who believe in the American dream are willing to accept elitism based on intellectual pursuits and merit, as opposed to elitism based on inherited wealth and privilege. However merit . . . is becoming a diminishing asset" (p. 172). By reducing the importance of merit, we invariably reduce mobility. If we reduce mobility based on merit, do we also reduce public schools' role as a means for talented but less affluent students to rise, economically and socially? Ornstein concludes that "It is doubtful if grossly underfunded

schools, managed by bureaucratic and sometimes cruel policies and staffed by many unprepared teachers, can make a dent" (p. 15).

Ornstein continues, "Not only do schools have little measurable effect on students' test scores and future earnings, what accounts for the assumed relationship between education and occupation and income are a number of underlying variables related to education such as family structure, inherited intelligence, peer group, and socioeconomic class" (p. 173). Those who start at the lower income brackets have less social capital that those who start in the middle or higher income categories. Those with less social capital come to school with few cognitive skills, and the gap worsens as the students pass from grade to grade. Parents with more social capital move into high-performing school districts, provide private tutoring, and work the system through university alumni associations, professional networks, and social contacts to assist their children's careers, ensuring class advantages. While Ornstein's view may be politically incorrect, and be anathema to Effective Schools advocates, his array of supporting data will give any thoughtful educator pause.

Class Counts is not a mainstream education theory text. It is, as Ornstein admits, somewhat of a rant. But the book deserves attention. In a world where leaders in effective schools are excessively focused on the fine scale achievement gaps between middle-class White and traditionally underserved minority and disabled students, perhaps it is wise to examine the larger frame. Do public schools still offer a meritocracy where talented and able students can work hard, learn, and gain the attitudes, knowledge, and skills for social and economic advancement? Or has culture changed so much that even middle-class students with a good education have little chance of making the social and economic gains available only a few generations ago?

It has long been known that disenfranchised students have difficulty meeting school academic goals. Nevertheless, schools employing the Effective Schools Correlates allowed traditionally underserved students to successfully answer the question, "What's in it for me?" The problem Ornstein raised, however, is much larger. If Ornstein is correct, there is a movement towards an entire middle class of students becoming disenfranchised from education. If the middle class cannot use public schools to advance their education and opportunities, what hope is there for less affluent students? These questions deserve serious and thoughtful discussion.

Education can be faulted for many failures. Effective schools, in our opinion, are generally proactive in meeting student learning needs. It might do us well to consider what Ornstein has to say about the country's increased hardening of class boundaries and shrinking middle class. Does the evidence suggest that the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is fading?

If Ornstein is correct, not considering the larger realities that confront students' futures may leave us unable to help them. This would be a failure from which students cannot recover. If Ornstein is incorrect, *Class Counts* still gives educators a broader lens by which to understand the larger societal and global context in which everyone works and to consider the implications for personal and professional lives.

Rooted in the philosophy of George Counts, Michael Harrington, and Christopher Jencks, *Class Counts* challenges educators in effective schools to consider if we are actually meeting children's instructional, intellectual, and attitudinal needs. Are students still being prepared to achieve the American Dream? What should be taught? How should it be taught? In a nation where less than half the population votes, how do

schools prepare students to meet their civic responsibility? Do teachers and students need to be helped to think meta-cognitively about what schooling means to their future and to the country's? If Ornstein is correct, it is again time for effective educators to be proactive. *Class*

Counts is a must read for any thinking, well-rounded, effective school leader.

NOTE: More information about the book and other reviews can be found at classcounts.org