WHY THE BEST ISN'T SO BAD: MODERATION AND IDEALS IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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ABSTRACT. In *Moderating the Debate: Rationality and the Promise of American Education*, Michael Feuer counsels reformers to ''satisfice'': moderate their expectations and accept that flawed reforms can be good enough. Implicit in Feuer's view of satisficing is the assumption that moderating expectations entails eschewing ideals and replacing optimal goals with modest, real-world solutions. In this essay, Deborah Kerdeman agrees with Feuer that moderation is vital for reform, but maintains that embracing moderation does not contradict pursuing goals. To show how goals and moderation work in concert to promote reform, Kerdeman examines and reframes Feuer's assumptions about ideals. She also distinguishes moderation from satisficing and argues that satisficing, not ideals, can be deleterious to reform. Kerdeman concludes that sensible policy and research, while important, will not necessarily help reformers embrace moderation; cultivating moderation instead requires ongoing self-examination.

INTRODUCTION

The best is the enemy of the good.[1]

If Michael Feuer were a psychiatrist assessing the health of reform, he undoubtedly would say that the patient suffers from manic depression. ''Reports of the condition of our schools,'' Feuer writes,

> are usually laced with large doses of gloom and doom, proposals for reform promise extraordinary solutions timed to coincide neatly with electoral cycles; we are always at the edge of economic and social ruin, about to be overrun by international rivals with superior schools and smarter students. But the rhetoric of reform promises salvation.[2]

When hopes for salvation do not materialize, despair descends. Disappointment eventually gives rise to another round of promises to elevate schools from the depths of defeat.[3]

To counter the ''cycle of exuberance and gloom'' (*MD*, 68), Feuer counsels reformers to recognize that ''objectively optimal solutions'' are a ''dangerous chimera'' (*MD*, 40). We must eschew ''an optimizing mentality in constant pursuit of maximal solutions'' (*MD*, 74), accept that human cognition is ''bounded'' (*MD*, 23, 32, and 67), and understand that policy and research will be imperfect (*MD*,

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1. Voltaire (1764), in *The New Penguin Dictionary of Quotations Updated and Expanded*, eds. John M. Cohen and Mark J. Cohen (New York: Viking, 1992), 442.

2. Michael J. Feuer, *Moderating the Debate: Rationality and the Promise of American Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press, 2006), ix. This work will be cited as *MD* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. See Seymour Sarason, *Schooling in America: Scapegoat and Salvation* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 4.

5, 23, 24, and 67–69). Admitting that imperfect solutions can be good enough, we ''satisfice,'' Feuer says, borrowing a term from Herbert Simon's theory of procedural rationality. ''My proposal,'' Feuer explains,

> is to adjust the theory of action underlying education reform and research, from one with implicit tones of optimization and objective rationality toward one that assumes conditions of complexity coupled with cognitive limits of educational decision makers; from one that inevitably disappoints researchers and reformers to one that embraces without shame or embarrassment the ideal of reasonable strategies based on appropriate deliberation; from one that sees inevitable failure in every imperfect proposal to one that tolerates incremental improvement, steady albeit slow progress, and continual evaluation. (*MD*, 39)

Satisficing does not erode standards (*MD*, 67), hinder science (*MD*, 69), or entrench the status quo (*MD*, 95). On the contrary, lowering expectations makes reforms realistic and achievable. Many scholars concur with Feuer that utopian expectations must be moderated if reforms are to succeed.[4]

Feuer's plea on behalf of moderation is important and refreshing. Feuer is right: moderation can advance educational reform. I would go farther and suggest that learning to embrace moderation extends to all of life.

Because I agree that moderation is vital, I want to examine Feuer's assumptions regarding this concept. Specifically, I want to analyze Feuer's equation of moderation with satisficing (*MD*, 40). Insofar as satisficing and moderation acknowledge limitation, Feuer's equation of these terms is understandable. But Feuer assumes that acknowledging limits entails forgoing ideals, or at least requires us to recast ideals as aims that are modest, not optimal.

Not everyone, however, believes that the quest for the best is bad. In his edited volume, *Holding Accountability Accountable: What Ought to Matter in Public Education*, Ken Sirotnik writes: ''The very survival of a political democracy depends on a participating, educated, and critically minded citizenry. Our public education system must therefore guarantee an equitable and empowering education for all the nation's children and youth.''[5] David Berliner espouses a

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4. See, for example, Larry Cuban, ''Reforming Again, Again, and Again,'' *Educational Researcher* 19, no. 1 (1990): 3–13; Frederick M. Hess and Jeffrey R. Henig, '''Scientific' Research and Policymaking: A Tool, Not a Crutch,'' *Education Week* (February 5, 2008), http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/02/06/22hess.h27.html; and Michael B. Katz, ''The New Educational Panic,'' in *America in Theory*, eds. Leslie Berlowitz, Denis Donoghue, and Louis Menand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 178–194.

5. Kenneth A. Sirotnik, *Holding Accountability Accountable: What Ought to Matter in Public Education* (New York: Teachers College Press 2004), 154. This work will be cited as *HAA* in the text for all subsequent references.

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similar view. In his article, ''Our Impoverished View of Education Research,'' Berliner asserts, ''It does take a whole village to raise a child, and we actually know a little bit about how to do that. What we seem not to know how to do in modern America is to raise the village to promote communal values that ensure that all our children will prosper.''[6]

Arguing that we must guarantee all children an empowering education, Sirotnik and Berliner do not ask reformers to satisfice. On the contrary, Sirotnik and Berliner exhort reformers to aim high. No child should be left behind when it comes to succeeding in school. The prosperity of our children and the survival of our democracy depend on our being able to attain this ideal.[7]

Is it possible to pursue ideals and at the same time be moderate: attuned to complexity, respectful of limits, and open to challenge and debate? This is the central question I explore in my response to Feuer's *Moderating the Debate*. Contrary to Feuer, I contend that satisficing and moderation differ and that moderation complements pursuing ideals. Far from being dangerous chimera, ideals routinely are instantiated in real-world practices. Satisficing, not the quest for the best, can lead to troubling consequences, particularly with respect to social justice.

Our efforts to realize ideals certainly can fail. But ''failed expectations'' (*MD*, 71) are not strictly risks we can calculate, as Feuer assumes (*MD*, 38, 51, and 87–88). Neither is disappointment a problem we can ''proactively contain'' (*MD*, 87) through procedural rationality (*MD*, 71). Disappointment and failure rather are experiences we limited human beings invariably will face; lowering expectations will not protect us from the possibility that we may be wrong. Our challenge is to acknowledge our failures when they occur, regarding them as opportunities to reexamine our ideals and to reaffirm our commitment to putting our ideals into practice.

Trying to live up to ideals even as we live through disappointment requires what I call a moderate disposition. Sensible research and policy, while important, will not necessarily help us become moderate. Aligning ourselves with a compact to satisfice will not necessarily help, either. Cultivating a moderate disposition instead is an ongoing exercise in self-examination.

My argument proceeds in five sections. Section One investigates why Feuer thinks that ideals are dangerous chimera. Section Two probes assumptions that

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6. David C. Berliner, ''Our Impoverished View of Educational Research,'' *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 6 (2006): 988. This work will be cited as *OIV* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. For more on ideals and education, see Doret de Ruyter, ''Ideals, Education, and Happy Flourishing,'' *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007): 23–35; and Harvey Siegel, ''High Stakes Testing, Educational Aims and Ideals, and Responsible Assessment,'' *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 3 (2004): 219–233. For examples that incorporate the language of ideals to describe the aims of reform, see the papers entitled ''Equity and Excellence in American Education'' and ''Reading and Literacy,'' in the National Academy of Education White Papers Initiative, 2008, http://www.naeducation.org/NAEd_White_Papers_Project.html.

support Feuer's belief that satisficing trumps ideals. Section Three analyzes satisficing as both a disposition and a standard in order to critique Feuer's claim that satisficing benefits reform.

Section Four reframes Feuer's understanding of ideals. Examining the meaning of imagination, I show how ideals are embodied in real-world institutions even as they also transcend the imperfect phenomena they animate. When we debate the meaning of ideals in light of real-world problems, we negotiate moral questions that we may otherwise ignore or deny. Section Five returns to the work of Sirotnik and Berliner to illustrate how my view of ideals can advance reform by helping us cultivate a moderate disposition.

Section One: Feuer's View of Ideals

> Aristocratic nations are naturally too apt to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations, to expand it beyond reason.[8]

Feuer holds two assumptions about ideals. First, he associates ideals with dreams (*MD*, 74). Dreams are imagined or "fantasized" (*MD*, 56). Insofar as ideals are dreams, ideals are imagined as well.

Second, Feuer assumes that ideals are "unattainable" (*MD*, 75). Feuer's assumption that ideals are unattainable follows from his belief that ideals are imagined. Imagination does not capture what is, Feuer suggests. Imagination rather posits a "utopia," a "lofty" world that represents what can be (*MD*, 65 and 75). Were imagined ideals to materialize and become extant states of affairs, they would cease to be images of perfection and instead would take on the characteristics of the flawed empirical world they inhabit. Ideals are "out there" on the horizon of possibility, always soaring beyond or above wherever we are.

Feuer's two assumptions about ideals can be combined into the following claim: ideals are aims we can imagine but cannot attain. Assuming that imagined ideals are unattainable, Feuer concludes that ideals are unreal. Real objects are concrete, subject to empirical limitations, and confined by material constraints. Ideals, by contrast, are ephemeral figments that transcend the material world. Ideals, moreover, are paragons of perfection. The real world, on the other hand, is imperfect: uncertain, ambiguous, divided, incomplete, and complex.

In contrasting real empirical circumstances with imagined ideals, Feuer assumes that these conditions represent countervailing states of affairs. Speaking about science, for example, Feuer writes:

> In an ideal world, perhaps, scientists might fantasize that norms of inquiry and decisions about methodology are left exclusively to researchers in their laboratories. But in the real world of user-oriented research, scientists whose work is aimed at the improvement of policy and practice have come to understand the significance of negotiated compromises. (*MD*, 56)

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8. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [1835], ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: New American Library, 1956), 158.

The contrast between the ideal and the real is stark, Feuer implies, as wide as the gap that divides earth from heaven (*MD*, 65, 66, and 74).

Feuer believes that most of the time, we distinguish the ideal from the real. Our eyes may gaze toward heaven. But our feet remain on firm ground. We cannot propel ourselves to the heights where ideals dwell or bring exalted ideals down to earth.

Of course, at times we regard ideals as goals we can actually achieve. Newspaper reports of educational research, for instance, may imply that ideal solutions to pedagogic problems really exist and that researchers have discovered them. Most people, however, understand that "rhetorical flourish" is an artifice of journalistic writing (*MD*, 39; see also 72–74).

Feuer concedes that "the idea of searching for an optimum is not, prima facie, a silly one" (*MD*, 5). Insofar as ideals can motivate social progress (*MD*, 72 and 75), representing ideals as achievable goals can be harmless and even beneficial. Nonetheless, Feuer is troubled by the frequency with which the pursuit of ideals becomes "ridiculous" and "bizarre" (*MD*, 24 and 66).

Though Feuer does not spell out why he believes the quest for the best can degenerate, examining his assumptions about ideals clarifies his reasoning. Because we have the power to imagine ideals, we think we are powerful enough to attain them. Ideals thus seduce us to inflate our capabilities. *Only the best will do*, we say. *Nothing can keep us down. We can achieve any goal we set out to accomplish.* Drunk with self-inflation, we no longer distinguish transcendent ideals from empirical facts. Instead we believe that ideals are real and consequently attainable. Confusing fantasy and reality, our thinking becomes deluded. We lose touch with secure ground and no longer know where we stand (*MD*, 68, 75, and 76–78).

The tendency to conflate the ideal and the real is prevalent. "[M]aximization assumptions are deeply entrenched in Western culture," Feuer warns (*MD*, 72). Education is especially vulnerable to delusional thinking. "Most people would like to believe in an idealized vision of solutions to our education problems," Feuer observes (*MD*, 66). "In our mind's eye exists some kind of optimal answer… and no one really wants to think that cataracts blur that vision" (*MD*, 66–67).

According to Feuer, many distinguished scholars have addressed the question of "why education in our democracy seems so vulnerable to political hyperbole" (*MD*, x). No one has adequately explained why we continue to believe that the quest for the best is realistic. Nor has anyone provided an alternative approach to policy and research that would release us from the delusion that grips our collective psyche. Feuer hopes that *Moderating the Debate* will help us see "the importance of confronting (and, one hopes, reducing) the potentially perverse effects of radical goals and unrealistically high standards of evidence" (*MD*, 75).

Section Two: Feuer's Satisficing Approach to Reform

Is it not time to awaken from the deceitful dream of a golden age and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?[9]

If mistaking ideals for achievable outcomes is deluded, we must distinguish the ideal from the real, Feuer suggests. Separating ideal aims from real-world solutions requires us to remember that ideals by definition surpass empirical constraints. Just because we can imagine ideals does not mean we can attain them.

To help us temper our overactive imaginations, Feuer focuses on two key tenets of procedural rationality: (1) reason is limited and bounded; and (2) bounded rationality can solve complex problems. Our challenge is to accept the limits of reason, lower our expectations, and satisfice.

Feuer proposes a modest compact, which he hopes will enable policy makers and researchers to satisfice (MD, 86). Upon agreeing to follow Feuer's compact, reformers can learn to appreciate that gains always entail costs (MD, 45, 51, and 87–88). People hold conflicting values (MD, 42, 62, and 65) and can be opportunistic (MD, 84–85). Research designs are prone to error (MD, 42, 69, and 91–92). Findings therefore are likely to be inconclusive and even confusing (MD, 95–96).

Rather than dwell in disappointment because the real world is flawed, satisficing reformers ''tolerate'' imperfect results (MD, 39 and 52). In so doing, they are not sunk in despair. Satisficing reformers instead understand that an imperfect world is not totally defective. Success may be incomplete, but utter failure is not typical, either. Success and failure rather are mutually conditioned. Some degree of both failure and success is likely.

Believing that reforms will neither completely succeed nor absolutely fail, satisficing reformers reject extremes like ''all'' or ''none.'' Instead they value the notion ''some.'' Even if a program does not benefit all children, *some* children will learn *something*, Feuer observes (MD, 72, emphasis in original). Valuing ''some'' over ''all-or-nothing,'' satisficing reformers are not entrenched in one ''best'' position. Rather they maintain some goals and are prepared to sacrifice others. Compromising some of their aims, satisficing reformers negotiate positions and seek ''middle-ground solutions'' (MD, 37; see also x, 46, 54, 56, and 57).

The value ''some'' presumes a certain standard for success. From a satisficing perspective, all reforms are problematic to some degree. Reforms that exhibit some degree of failure along with some measure of success cannot be judged according to an all-or-nothing standard. Our goal, Feuer maintains, is to assess degrees of imperfection in order to determine whether a policy or finding is ''reasonably good'' (MD, 38, 51–53, 62, and 87–88). Reasonable goodness thus replaces perfection as the standard toward which reforms should aim. Reasonably

9. Alexander Hamilton, Federalist no. 6 (1787). Cited by James Chace, ''Dreams of Perfectibility: American Exceptionalism and the Search for a Moral Foreign Policy,'' in *America in Theory*, eds. Berlowitz, Donoghue, and Menand, 253.

good reforms, Feuer notes, are characterized by ''incremental improvement, steady albeit slow progress, and continual evaluation'' (*MD*, 39).

In sum, satisficing reformers reject paralyzing ideals. Instead they accept limitation and value the notion ''some.'' Favoring ''some'' over ''all-or-nothing,'' satisficing reformers compromise positions and weigh benefits and costs. Because they give up some goals and incur some risks, satisficing reformers achieve some measure of success. Satisficing reforms may be partial and slow, but they are reasonable and attainable. ''The rational approach to solving our toughest educational problems is to look for better — not necessarily best — results,'' Feuer concludes (*MD*, xii). ''[S]eeking reasonably good answers to complex questions is as good or better than holding out for an idealized optimum'' (*MD*, 53; see also 97).

Section Three: A Critical Response to Satisficing Reform

[C]onsiderations of expediency turn morality and justice upside down.[10]

The outcome that Feuer believes satisficing produces — achievable reforms that are researched and implemented by reasonable people who are unfazed by imperfection — seems laudable. On closer inspection, however, satisficing proves problematic. Problems become evident when we examine satisficing as a disposition and as a standard for policy and research.

A Satisficing Disposition: Feuer's Compact

Introducing his compact, Feuer writes that his proposal, ''if enforced, might restore some modicum of reasonableness to the continuing debates over how to improve education and how to know if policies and practices are working'' (*MD*, 86). In light of the fact that satisficing has been successfully adopted by learning theorists and policy makers outside of education (*MD*, xii and 19–32), Feuer's comment about enforcement is puzzling. Wouldn't educational reformers follow suit and willingly adopt Feuer's modest rules?

It is possible, of course, that because satisficing is new to educational reformers, it may take time for this behavior to sink in. Until satisficing becomes familiar, external compulsion may be necessary (*MD*, 87). The need to enforce satisficing, therefore, is not altogether surprising.

But Feuer's proposed mechanism to monitor compliance signals deeper trouble. He writes: ''Absent natural incentives among individual politicians to seek reasonable rather than extravagant solutions, a remedy may necessitate some kind of collective action. For example, consider a new reform watchdog group'' (*MD*, 94–95).

Feuer's call for a watchdog group to enforce his compact suggests that satisficing is not simply unfamiliar behavior that reformers will eventually adopt after sufficient training and practice. Feuer instead implies that satisficing may be hard for reformers to internalize. If the disposition to satisfice were easily

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10. Spoken by Dr. Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882), Act V. *Seven Plays by Henrik Ibsen* (Roslyn, New York: Walter J. Black, 1970), 163.

embraced, it would be self-motivating and would not need to be externally monitored. Among reformers who are ready to satisfice, Feuer's compact may serve as a reminder to lower expectations. But a compact cannot move people to satisfice if they are not already committed to do so. Because behavior that feels artificial tends to be relinquished once enforcements are removed, Feuer's watchdog group represents a necessary and permanent feature of satisficing reform.

Of course, just because some reformers may not satisfice does not mean that Feuer's compact is completely ineffective. To expect that a compact will convince all reformers to moderate their behavior is to indulge in the kind of grandiose thinking that procedural rationality and satisficing eschew. But Feuer suggests that unwillingness to satisfice will not be confined to a few recalcitrant individuals. Feuer cautions researchers "to be aware of the almost certain likelihood that their findings will be overinterpreted for political or ideological gain" (*MD*, 91). In other words, despite rules that clearly spell out how to tone down language, modify standards, and lower expectations, Feuer believes that overinterpretation of findings remains likely.

The probability that inflated expectations will continue despite Feuer's sensible compact suggests that the urge to pursue ideals is powerful among reformers. In contrast to satisficing, the quest for the best has been sustained throughout the history of education (*MD*, 65–66). Given the longevity of the quest for the best, we can conclude that pursuing ideals is easier for reformers than compliance with Feuer's compact.

In sum, Feuer's compact will not necessarily convince reformers to lower expectations. Feuer recognizes that his modest rules will need to be enforced. External compulsion is necessary, not simply because satisficing is new behavior, but because reformers are unlikely to internalize this disposition.

Satisficing as Standard for Successful Reform: Valuing "Some" Over "All"

Even if policy makers and researchers could willingly temper expectations, satisficing does not benefit reform as much as Feuer thinks. To understand why, it is necessary to analyze what follows from the fact that satisficing values the notion "some." From a satisficing perspective, reasonably good reforms can benefit some people without necessarily benefiting all (*MD*, 72). To expect reforms to help all people is to be seduced by an unrealistic ideal that cannot be fulfilled.

The goal of helping some people suggests that a reasonably good reform can be equitable even if it does not benefit all people equally. This standard raises three questions about who gains — and who is excluded — from the benefits of satisficing reform. First, how many people must benefit from a satisficing reform for it to be considered equitable or reasonably good? Second, is satisficing reform equitable if particular groups of similarly situated people are systematically excluded from the benefits of reform? Third, how can we tell when preconditions for equitable satisficing reform have been met?

Turning first to the question of how many people a satisficing reform must help in order to be considered equitable or reasonably good, Feuer might reply that this question calls for specific judgments that will vary from context to context. But Feuer intimates that reasonable goodness also represents a general standard that can be defined conceptually and applied across different situations. A general definition of reasonable goodness is evident in Feuer's discussion of why ''the public bureaucratic model'' of schooling has survived despite moves to privatize education through vouchers and charter schools: ''Without compelling evidence of political failure on a grand scale, it follows axiomatically that the survival of the public education system must be based at least partially on a broad social calculation that the benefits exceed the costs'' (*MD*, 38). The words ''broad social calculation'' suggest that, according to Feuer, the public bureaucratic model survives challenges because more people than not believe this model benefits them.

A reform succeeds, Feuer thus suggests, insofar as more people than not conclude that they benefit from it. It is unclear whether Feuer believes that the number of beneficiaries must be a majority, a supermajority, or some other definition of ''more.'' Feuer might say we cannot determine a specific figure in advance or outside of a given problem-situation. This ambiguity notwithstanding, it is evident that for Feuer, helping some people is not enough for a reform to be considered successful. Successful reforms must benefit at least a majority of people, however large the ''required majority'' turns out to be.

No matter the size of the majority that benefits from a reform, some number of people will be left out. This is because partial success inevitably produces a degree of exclusion. Of course, reformers can strive to widen the circle of beneficiaries. As Feuer notes, ''The absence of an optimum does not diminish the pursuit of better and better outcomes, through debate and experimentation and continued trial and error'' (*MD*, 71). In an imperfect world, however, not everyone can be helped. Some people will benefit; some will not. Satisficing reformers understand and accept this reality.

The fact that some people invariably are excluded from satisficing reform leads to the second question we must address in order to clarify the full implications of Feuer's proposal. If exclusion is inevitable, can it be fair? Who exactly is left out of satisficing reforms? Are the same people excluded over and over?

One answer to this set of questions may be inferred from Feuer's views concerning how Americans make decisions about education. Feuer states: ''Americans are free to choose how to organize their schools'' (*MD*, 38). He also claims: ''Americans have always been free to change their system of educational governance, which is a good thing, given the gross injustices that have been corrected only by the sweat of grassroots activists, lawyers, and politicians committed to social change'' (*MD*, 37–38).

Feuer's comments suggest that satisficing exclusion is fair because Americans are free to change how education is organized and governed. By exercising these freedoms, Americans are able to shift the burden of exclusion if they want. If

people did not have these freedoms, exclusion would be unfair because the same individuals or groups could repeatedly be excluded from decisions concerning education and educational reform.[11]

The assumption that these conditions render exclusion fair can be debated. We may wonder, for example, why those in power would want to change a system to benefit those whom the system excludes, particularly if change requires those with power to sacrifice privileges that the system confers on them. We also may wonder how disadvantaged parties may garner the means to change a system from which they are excluded. In light of these issues, satisficing reformers would do well to continue pondering the conditions that must obtain if inevitable exclusion is to be fair.

Let's assume that preconditions for fair exclusion can be defined, that is, that we can agree as to how many and who must benefit from a reform for it to be adopted. Settling this question brings a third problem to light. In order to proceed, satisficing reformers might want to investigate whether their agreed-upon preconditions in fact exist. Like any empirical investigation, research on the existence of fairness preconditions requires that we evaluate the validity of the research according to some standard.

Feuer is clear what this standard should be with respect to evaluating theory. Speaking about appropriate standards for assessing his theory of procedural rationality, Feuer writes:

> My point here is, essentially, to practice what I preach. In order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my suggested framework, we could actually apply its core principles. In other words, we can be procedurally rational in the evaluation of procedural rationality. The notion that seeking reasonably good answers to complex questions is as good or better than holding out for an idealized optimum is quite amenable to devising a strategy and methodology for validating the theory of procedural rationality in educational organization and governance. (*MD*, 53; see also 86)

In other words, Feuer maintains that his framework cannot be evaluated against an ideal standard of success. Feuer's theory will not and cannot answer all questions perfectly. Feuer's theory can answer some questions reasonably well, however. In short, it can satisfice. Satisficing — not perfection — is the standard Feuer advocates for assessing the merit of theories, including his own.

Feuer's standard for evaluating theories can be applied to research. Research designs and evidence may be flawed, but ambiguous and uncertain findings nonetheless may be reasonably good. Like theory, research can satisfice. In an imperfect world, imperfect findings are good enough.

If satisficing is the standard empirical research must meet, then researchers who investigate whether satisficing exclusion can be fair must satisfice as well.

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11. Because Feuer does not identify exclusion as a consequence of satisficing, he does not explicate his views regarding how and why exclusion might be fair. I therefore am trying to construct a position Feuer might take, based on my interpretation of his work. Feuer certainly may believe that fair exclusion requires different preconditions. I hope my comments stimulate further reflection on this matter.

Researchers cannot expect to establish beyond a shadow of a doubt whether fairness preconditions in fact exist. Satisficing research can be reasonably good, however — good enough to help guide satisficing reform.

If researchers cannot be sure that their findings are accurate or complete, then the possibility arises that policy makers who use satisficing research will embark on programs even though fairness preconditions are absent. Despite reasonable decisions and good faith efforts, satisficing reforms may be undertaken in an environment of unfair exclusion. This situation can arise in various ways. For example, a study that is reasonably good may conclude that fairness preconditions exist. Nevertheless, the study's findings may be refuted down the road. Before problems are detected, however, policy makers use the research as a basis for making recommendations. Alternatively, policy makers may undertake a cost-benefit analysis of the risks associated with basing a program on inconclusive findings. Exercising their best judgment, policy makers may decide that the risk of using ambiguous conclusions outweighs the cost of dismissing the research. This decision may turn out to exacerbate unfair exclusion. At the time a decision needs to be made, however, this outcome cannot be foreseen.

Feuer might say that undertaking satisficing reform when fairness preconditions are absent does not necessarily mean that satisficing policy makers are acting inconsistently or that satisficing researchers condone unfair exclusion. Accepting that research is uncertain can inspire policy makers and researchers to help make unfair exclusion less probable. In this respect, satisficing research complements satisficing policy. At both levels, satisficing can motivate people to make fairness preconditions more common.

But if satisficing is our standard, as Feuer suggests, then policy makers and researchers cannot be certain that fairness preconditions actually exist. Neither can they expect unfair exclusion to completely disappear. In the real world, we must accept that unfair exclusion will persist and that research will not always correctly detect this situation. Despite efforts to articulate and test fairness preconditions, unfair exclusion remains inevitable if satisficing is our benchmark for success.

Because Feuer does not discuss exclusion, we do not know how he would respond to the fact that satisficing renders exclusion inevitable. Based on the argument Feuer makes on behalf of satisficing, we can imagine how a defense of satisficing exclusion might proceed. Some success is better than none, satisficing reformers might say. If partial success produces unfair exclusion, this is the price satisficing reformers are prepared to pay. Unfair exclusion at least is contained. Its effects are confined to some people, not experienced by everyone. Reformers can work to reduce the frequency of unfair exclusion and try to mitigate its impact.

The alternative to satisficing is to chase the ideal that all children will benefit from reform. When reformers hold out for perfection, everyone stands to lose. Pursuing an all-or-nothing ideal polarizes reformers and paralyzes policy and research. Unfair exclusion is unfortunate but unavoidable, satisficing reformers may conclude. Paralysis, on the other hand, need not arise. To knowingly paralyze

reform by pursuing unrealistic ideals is far worse than choosing to live with unfair exclusion.

Carried to its logical conclusion, satisficing compels reformers to choose unfair exclusion over the possibility of paralysis. This is a choice between two evils. Neither paralysis nor unfair exclusion is good for reform or beneficial for our welfare as human beings. Progress cannot depend on systematically excluding even a few children from the chance to benefit from reform. In the words of Ken Sirotnik, ''Real people are involved here; they have real hopes and human desires'' (*HAA*, 164). Sirotnik argues that denying any person his or her basic humanity in the name of improving education is morally untenable and contradicts the transformative capacity of teaching and learning (*HAA*, 12).

Satisficing is not the best we can expect. As a standard for reform, satisficing produces exclusion and cannot determine whether exclusion is fair. This situation is morally troubling. We must find a better way to conceptualize the limits and possibilities of reform.

Section Four: Reimagining Ideals

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?[12]

If satisficing is more problematic than Feuer believes, the pursuit of ideals is less pernicious than Feuer fears. To develop this claim, it is necessary to reframe how Feuer conceptualizes ideals. It also is necessary to reframe Feuer's understanding of limitation and to show how acknowledging limitation need not preclude ideals. In this section, I reconceive Feuer's view of ideals. In the next section, I consider how pursuing ideals can facilitate acknowledging limitation for the benefit of reform.

The Ideal and The Real: An ''Apart From/A Part Of'' Tension

To rethink Feuer's view of ideals, I want to return to Feuer's key assumption discussed in Section One: ideals are aims we can imagine but cannot attain. Feuer's assumption that ideals are unattainable turns on how he conceives of imagination. Feuer suggests that imagination projects possibilities that are removed from the grip of real-world constraints. Insofar as imagined ideals transcend prevailing circumstances, ideals seem to be ephemeral and remote. That which we can attain, by contrast, is concrete and proximate. Believing we can attain ideals is delusional, Feuer implies, because this belief confuses the ideal and the real. We therefore must satisfice: control our penchant to chase ideals and limit ourselves to programs and strategies we can actually grasp. A presumed opposition between ''real'' and ''ideal'' supports Feuer's assumption that imagined ideals exceed our grasp.

In concluding that ideals are unattainable because they are imagined, Feuer stresses the power of imagination to carry us away. Feuer forgets that imagination

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12. Spoken by the title character in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue ''Andrea del Sarto'' (1855), lines 97–98. Available on the Web site ''Representative Poetry Online,'' http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/264.html.

is activated and exercised by human beings. *We* are the source of imagination, not some point outside of us. As the play of children suggests, the ability to imagine arises early in life and may even be innate. Imagination is intimately tied to human experience.

In light of the fact that human beings summon and direct imagination, Feuer's understanding of imagination is one-sided. Imagination does not simply connote a fanciful transcendent state. More precisely, imagination represents the *human capability to fathom* transcendent states. Where imagination is concerned, the possibility to rise above our situation is grounded in our capacity to desire, think, prefer, choose, and act.

Recognizing that the capacity to imagine is part of being human, let's return to Feuer's claim about ideals. Feuer's understanding of ideals is not entirely wrong. Insofar as imagination points beyond current conditions, imagined ideals certainly surpass the confines of everyday life.

But the fact that imagined ideals are removed from our immediate situation does not mean that ideals are divorced from real-world concerns or that ideals lie completely beyond our grasp. On the contrary, ideals come into existence because *we* imagine them. The existence of ideals, in other words, is contingent on our capabilities, however restricted, fragile, and limited our capabilities may be. If we did not imagine ideals, they would not arise.

Ideals thus depend on what we think, say, want, and do, even as they transcend our situation and are not circumscribed by our accomplishments. As aims we imagine, ideals are not strictly unattainable, as Feuer assumes. Rather, we can paraphrase Browning's Andrea del Sarto and say that ideals exceed our grasp and also are within our reach. Ideals are *a part of us* but also stand *apart from* us.

Insofar as ideals are a part of us, they animate our lives in palpable ways and are susceptible to being shaped by our beliefs and actions. While ideals are not independent objects that are connected to us only contingently, neither are they subjective states so intimately tied to our lives that we cannot distinguish them from our immediate experience. Ideals surpass what we already know and can do and represent aims toward which we strive but which we can never actualize completely. In this respect, ideals stand apart from our lives, even as they also are a part of our lives.

The Role of Ideals in Everyday Life

To illustrate how ideals both transcend and depend on us, I want to consider the role of ideals in everyday life. Insofar as ideals are a part of us, they are not freestanding abstractions or imaginary figments that fail to touch real-world concerns. Ideals instead are inherent in social institutions, practices, and customs. As Michael Sandel explains, ''Political institutions are not simply instruments

that implement ideas independently conceived; they are themselves embodiments of ideas.''[13] To paraphrase Sandel, ideals inhabit our world from the start.

Universal public education exemplifies my claim that transcendent ideals are instantiated in real-world institutions. The ideal that education should be publicly funded and available to all children is ''lived out'' through the practices and institutions of public schooling.[14] The way we collect and distribute local taxes, the attention we pay to the location of schools in the context of neighborhood demographics, and the idea that school boards consist of citizens elected by voters are some of the ways that the ideal of public education takes shape in our daily lives.

Because public schools are pervasive and taken for granted, we sometimes forget that the institutions and practices of schooling embody an educational ideal. A reform like charter schools brings the ideal of public education into focus by inciting us to question anew what this ideal means. Can publicly funded schools that are not subject to state laws or district regulations still be considered public schools? Are schools that are governed by for-profit corporations ''public?'' Some people think charter schools are an inventive way to ensure that the ideal of universal public education continues to be relevant and effective. Others think that charter schools subvert this ideal. In debating the merits of these two positions, the very meaning of public education as an ideal is examined. Debates about charter schools are compelling because the meaning of the ideal of universal public education is neither preordained nor irrelevant to our real-world concerns. The meaning of this ideal instead is worked out through the process of institutional reform.[15]

The meaning of ideals thus becomes evident in real-world institutions and is negotiated by engaging in real-world debates. The fact that ideals are manifested in our institutions and practices, however, does not mean that ideals can be reduced to or equated with the phenomena that embody them. If ideals are palpable and part of us, ideals also are projections that stand apart from us. Ideals in this sense surpass the imperfect phenomena they enliven and cannot be completely or definitively grasped. As the debate about charter schools suggests, people often

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13. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), ix.

14. I take the phrase ''lived out'' from Georgia Warnke. See Georgia Warnke, *Justice and Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), 5.

15. For more on debates surrounding charter schools, see Kathleen Knight Abowitz, ''Charter Schooling and Social Justice,'' *Educational Theory* 51, no. 2 (2001): 151–170; Leigh Dingerson, Barbara Miner, Bob Peterson, and Stephanie Walters, eds., *Keeping the Promise: The Debate Over Charter Schools* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools, 2008); Paul Thomas Hill, Robin J. Lake, and Mary Beth Cello, *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002); Gary Miron and Christopher D. Nelson, *What's Public About Charter Schools? Lessons Learned About Choice and Accountability* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2002); and Amy Stuart Wells, ed., *Where Charter School Policy Fails: The Problems of Accountability and Equity* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

disagree about what ideals mean with respect to the direction and shape of specific institutions and practices.

The fact that ideals cannot be fully realized does not render ideals unrecognizable or less compelling. Ideals are identifiable as ideals, even by imperfect beings. Michele Moses offers an interesting analysis of how ideals influence policy debates.[16] Moses explains that policy conflicts often trace back to a set of common ideals. Because ideals tend to be conceptualized in ways that are general and implicit, policy makers often differ over how ideals should be interpreted, prioritized, and applied in specific settings. But conflict at this practical level does not necessarily mean that policy makers disagree about ideals or that ideals are absent from policy discussions. Indeed, debates can become heated precisely because policy makers are moved by common ideals.[17] Moses concludes that identifying the shared ideals that unite different positions is a crucial first step in successfully resolving policy disputes.

In sum, understanding that ideals are both "a part of" and "apart from" our lives challenges Feuer's assumption that an impassable gulf separates the "ideal" from the "real." Ideals imbue our everyday world even as they transcend ordinary material constraints. Ideals therefore are not remote or utterly unattainable. An ideal becomes real insofar as we debate and instantiate its meaning in the context of specific practices and institutions. Of course, instantiations of ideals will be imperfect. Ideals are no less real, however. Social institutions are meaningful in part because ideals infuse and enliven them. We live some understanding of ideals all the time.[18]

Section Five: Ideals, Moderation, and Educational Reform

It is not incumbent on you to complete the task. Neither are you free to desist from it.[19]

The claim that ideals both infuse and transcend social institutions and practices suggests a certain way to approach educational reform. On the one hand, ideals are "a part of" reforms. Ideals express the values that animate policies and communicate the direction for positive change that reforms promote. NCLB, for example, takes its name from the ideal "leave no child behind."

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16. Michele S. Moses, "Contested Ideals: Understanding Moral Disagreements Over Education Policy," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35, no. 4 (2004): 471–482.

17. See Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Taylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 36–37.

18. Hans-Georg Gadamer puts the point like this: "The law is always deficient, not because it is imperfect in itself but because human reality is necessarily imperfect in comparison to the ordered world of law, and hence allows of no simple application of the law." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 316. For more on Gadamer's view of ideals, see *Truth and Method*, 317–318.

19. Pirkei Avot [Ethics of the Fathers] 2:16, in *Mishnayot Vol. 4 Order Nezikin* [Damages], 2nd ed., trans. Philip Blackman (New York: Judaica Press, 1977), 505.

David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot suggest that NCLB's ideal of leaving no child behind is deeply rooted in our nation's history: "Historically and in the present, public education has represented the only commitment by which American society has guaranteed to serve the needs and interests of all its citizens."[20] Following Tyack and Hansot, we can say that NCLB makes palpable a moral vision we have for ourselves as Americans. From this perspective, NCLB does not exemplify hyperbolic "spin." NCLB instead reminds us of our national self-image and invokes the "best self" we want to become.[21]

But if ideals are a part of reforms, ideals also are "apart from" reforms. Ideals escape the grasp of reformers and cannot be reduced to or equated with imperfect policies. Those who develop and enact reforms will invariably encounter obstacles that prevent them from fully achieving the ideals that policies incorporate.

The fact that ideals stand apart from reforms does not mean that ideals are irrelevant to reform. Recognizing that NCLB cannot live up to its name, we do not say, "Let's enact a reform that will leave some children behind." This claim sounds ridiculous, because on some level we recognize that it fails to capture our national self-image and is not a vision of the good at all.

Appreciating that ideals are both *a part of* and *apart from* reform, policy makers try to develop programs that resonate with the moral ideals we believe define us as a country. At the same time, reformers must not confuse imperfect policies with the perfect ideals they seek to embody. There is a tension between perceiving the reality of ideals in our lives and, at the same time, respecting the fact that ideals inevitably surpass our ability to instantiate them. Actively addressing this tension is essential if reformers are to improve education in ways that are morally sound and existentially compelling.

To explore the challenges that an "a part of/apart from" view of ideals poses for reformers, I want to return to the work of Ken Sirotnik and David Berliner, noted in my introduction. Neither Sirotnik nor Berliner explicitly discusses the idea that we understand ideals as being dialectically related to us. Nonetheless, their insights into problems that beset NCLB illustrate what can happen when we forget or deny that ideals are a part of us and also stand apart from us. Berliner and Sirotnik also suggest what we can do when our understanding of ideals goes awry, and how reorienting our understanding of ideals can aid reform.

Ken Sirotnik: "A Part Of" Must Not Neglect "Apart From"

Sirotnik illustrates what can happen when we start to believe that NCLB enables us to literally grasp ideals. As expressed in NCLB, the ideal of leaving no

20. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, "Conflict and Consensus in American Public Education," *Daedalus* 110, no. 3 (1981): 22.

21. I base this claim on Charles B. Guignon's discussion of "constitutive values." See Charles B. Guignon, "Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger,* ed. Charles B. Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 228–231.

child behind is an "umbrella" ideal that incorporates a number of subsidiary ideals. Chief among these subsidiary ideals is the ideal that schools are accountable for closing the achievement gap between privileged students and students who attend consistently underperforming schools. Sirotnik argues that public schools should be held accountable for providing "an equitable and empowering education for all the nation's children and youth" (*HAA*, 154; see also 9 and 163).

While the ideal of accountability is laudable, Sirotnik maintains that in the context of NCLB, accountability has degenerated into "accountabilism" (*HAA*, 8). Accountabilism is the simplistic belief that "accountability for public education must rely on test score information collected from students in sufficiently standardized fashion so that it can be aggregated upward to school, district, state, and national levels" (*HAA*, 159). Accountabilism further presumes that information garnered from tests represents a complete, definitive, and perfectly transparent indicator of student learning. Finally, accountabilism maintains that schools alone are answerable for students' performance on high-stakes tests. Failing to increase student performance, schools risk losing funding.

These practices are failing, Sirotnik contends. "[T]he children and youth who are really hurt most by all this continue to be those in poorer communities and in grossly underfunded and poorly staffed schools," he writes (*HAA*, 6). To counter "heavy-handed" accountabilism (*HAA*, 9), Sirotnik couples accountability with responsibility. "To be both *responsible and accountable*," Sirotnik explains, "demands that we care deeply about the well-being of our children and that we bring the best ideas, the best knowledge, and the best practices and professional judgments to bear on the education of future citizens of our society and our world" (*HAA*, 155, emphasis in original; see also 162).

Instead of assuming that increasing achievement is a problem only for schools, responsible accountability holds everyone accountable for realizing this goal. "[J]ust as educators need to be held accountable," Sirotnik maintains, "so do policymakers and the public as a whole for the validity of the educational accountability systems they establish and the social and political conditions within which they expect these systems to work" (*HAA*, 155; see also 163). In operational terms, responsible accountability broadens the array of indicators by which achievement is measured (*HAA*, 162), works to reduce inequities sustained by racist and classist practices (*HAA*, 152), and increases resources for schools that have fewer resources to begin with (*HAA*, 11, 13, 155, and 157).

Sirotnik concedes that embracing responsible accountability is hard. The mindset of accountabilism, while pathological, is deep-seated (*HAA*, 10 and 159). Sirotnik proposes a "thought adventure" to help us "challenge ourselves to think out of the box, to identify and seriously question deep assumptions" that fuel accountabilism (*HAA*, 159–162). "Unshackling ourselves from the demands of traditional accountability systems," Sirotnik concludes, "provides wonderful opportunities to think anew about authentic ways in which no child is ever left behind throughout his or her time in public education" (*HAA*, 161).

Sirotnik's critique of accountabilism can be framed in the "a part of/apart from" language that describes our relationship to ideals. Insofar as NCLB extols the ideal of accountability, it understands that this ideal is a part of reform and expresses values that Americans cherish. But NCLB interprets being a part of reform too literally when it proclaims that achievement can be measured, aggregated, and compared on the basis of a single standardized test. NCLB further literalizes being a part of reform when it assumes that successful performance is fully achievable, that teachers alone are accountable for students' performance, and that schools deserve to be punished when test scores fail to rise. NCLB thus confuses accountability as an ideal with accountabilism as an imperfect practice. It ignores the "apart from" aspect of ideals.

By contrast, responsible accountability does not literalize accountability as an ideal but instead appreciates that this ideal stands apart from the imperfect practices that embody it. Reminding us that accountability stands apart from our lives, Sirotnik does not relinquish this ideal. His thought adventure rather invites us to take this ideal seriously. If we really value accountability, Sirotnik suggests, we will do what it takes to improve achievement, not deflect this responsibility onto teachers or equate accountability for achievement with performance on one flawed test. Taking accountability seriously means holding *ourselves* accountable. Remembering that ideals stand apart from our lives thus can help us make ideals more authentically a part of our lives.

David Berliner: "Apart From" Must Not Neglect "A Part Of"

Whereas Sirotnik argues that NCLB takes being a part of reform too literally, Berliner maintains that NCLB does not truly reach for ideals it professes. To understand Berliner's insight, it is helpful to explore his views concerning how NCLB regards the ideal of self-transformation. "[O]ur great American capacity for self-transformation," Berliner writes, is "a major element in the stories we tell of our American nation" (*OIV*, 954). For many Americans, schooling is the principal institution through which the ideal of self-transformation becomes real for children.

Berliner suggests that if self-transformation is part of our national story, and if schooling is the principal institution through which this ideal is realized, then we ought to consider what self-transformation through schooling requires. According to Berliner, serious consideration of this matter requires us to confront the fact that not all schools have access to resources for self-transformation. In schools with inadequate resources, self-transformation may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

NCLB obscures this point, Berliner argues. Rather than attend to the socioeconomic conditions of the neighborhoods in which schools are "nested" (*OIV*, 951), NCLB assumes that schools exist in a social vacuum and are untouched by resource inequities. NCLB instead holds schools exclusively accountable for increasing achievement and, by extension, for helping students realize self-transformation through learning (*OIV*, 951, 954, and 988). If achievement does not improve, the fault rests entirely with schools. Policy makers and the public, meanwhile, "are all refusing to acknowledge the root problem contended with by

too many American schools,'' namely, poverty and segregation by class, ethnicity, and race (*OIV*, 955; see also 951).[22]

Refusing to consider the connection between achievement and poverty, and believing that schools can increase achievement without adequate resources, we treat the ideal of self-transformation as if it were self-fulfilling. To wrestle with self-transformation in the context of real-world problems sullies its status as an ideal, we mistakenly think. As Berliner puts it, ''the idea that schools *cannot* cure poverty by themselves sounds something like a vote of no confidence in our great American capacity for self-transformation'' (*OIV*, 954).

It is not enough, Berliner insists, for ideals to be ''well-entrenched'' in our collective psyche (*OIV*, 954). Insofar as we value ideals and think they are part of our lives, we must examine the meaning of ideals in the context of actual problems and work to realize them in light of these problems. To simply affirm self-transformation as an ideal without addressing the conditions that enable or inhibit it is hypocritical and compromises our belief that America is a place where self-transformation is achievable.

Berliner's indictment of NCLB can be interpreted within the ''a part of/apart from'' view of ideals I propose. On the one hand, we value self-transformation and believe that this ideal should be realized through schooling. On the other hand, we assume that economic inequities have no bearing on the capacity of schools to help students achieve this ideal. Instead we believe that the meaning of self-transformation is obvious and that realizing this ideal in school should be unproblematic. From this confused perspective, self-transformation is not really a part of our lives. Self-transformation instead stands apart from our lives. Self-transformation becomes a myth, an ideal that we say we uphold but in truth only imagine.[23]

IDEALS, LIMITATION, AND MODERATION

Reflecting on problems that plague NCLB, Sirotnik and Berliner illustrate what can happen when reformers' understanding of ideals is one-sided. Either ideals are a part of reform but do not stand apart from reform (Sirotnik), or else ideals stand apart from reform but are not truly a part of reform (Berliner). In the first case, we interpret ideals too literally. In the second case, our espousal of ideals is hypocritical. In both cases, reform can become punitive, narrow, and ineffective.

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22. For more on NCLB and poverty, see Adam Gamoran, ed., *Standards-Based Reform and the Poverty Gap: Lessons Learned from No Child Left Behind* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007). Whether closing the achievement gap requires policy makers to invest in social programs is a contentious issue. See, for example, Michael Rebell and Jessica Wolff, *Moving Every Child Ahead: From NCLB Hype to Meaningful Educational Opportunity* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008); and David J. Hoff, ''Democrats Air Dueling Ideas On Education,'' *Education Week* (August 22, 2008), http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/08/27/01dems.h28.html.

23. Charles Taylor argues that unless an ideal is examined, ''the ideal sinks to the level of an axiom, something one doesn't challenge but also never expounds.'' See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 17.

To redress the literalist mindset of NCLB, Sirotnik exhorts us to remember that if ideals are a part of our lives, ideals also stand apart from our lives. This does not mean that we should diminish or shun ideals. It does mean that for us limited human beings, realizing ideals takes work and that we always confront a choice to ignore or engage in this work. Berliner suggests that unless we work to instantiate ideals, the ideals we profess are not truly a part of our lives. Appreciating the ''a part of'' dimension of ideals does not compromise their force as moral exemplars. This perspective instead can be an opportunity to examine what we limited creatures can do to live up to the ideals we cherish. Following Sirotnik and Berliner, we can say that an ''a part of/apart from'' view of ideals challenges us to live up to ideals, even as we confront our limitations. Insofar as ideals provide moral direction, they can help us work through our limitations, not succumb to despair.

Understanding that pursuing ideals can bring our limitations into focus, even as acknowledging our limitations can galvanize us to pursue ideals, challenges us to embrace two impulses that may seem contradictory. When we hold these two impulses together — not favoring one or the other — we exhibit what I call a ''moderate disposition.'' Sirotnik and Berliner demonstrate that internalizing moderation is hard. From Sirotnik's perspective, understanding that ideals, which are a part of our lives, also stand apart from our lives, demands that we dislodge deep-seated literalist thinking. Berliner shows how quickly hypocrisy can overtake us. Proclaiming ideals is easy. Working to realize them can be daunting.

Confronting our hypocritical and literalist tendencies, we need not rationalize limited aims as the best we can do. Sirotnik and Berliner instead challenge us to consider why we refuse to take responsibility for realizing the ideals we profess. Within the context of NCLB, taking responsibility for ameliorating the achievement gap means that debating the validity and reliability of tests, while necessary, is insufficient. We also must engage in a process of self-examination in which we ask what the existence of the achievement gap means for our integrity as a nation that espouses ideals of self-transformation and high-quality education for all. Closing the gap, we as a nation strive to become our own best ''self.'' Trying to live up to our ideals, we surely will encounter failure. Our challenge is to experience failure, learn what we can from it, and continue working to realize our ideals. This is not a process we can ever complete. This process instead is one that reformers — and we all — must continually undertake.[24]

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24. President Abraham Lincoln's ''Gettysburg Address'' and Dr. Martin Luther King's speech ''I Have a Dream'' exemplify calls to national self-examination.

Conclusion

Some men see things as they are and say, why. I dream things that never were and say, why not.[25]

Feuer contends that the quest for the best is inflating, delusional, and deleterious for reform. We must eschew ideals, manage failure, and accept that flawed reforms are good enough. Learning to satisfice, reformers can implement and sustain modest workable solutions to real-world educational problems.

I agree with Feuer that moderation is vital. But embracing moderation does not entail satisficing. We should not forego our ideals to advance education. Failure cannot be managed. It can only be experienced. Moderation challenges us to live up to ideals we cherish, even as we live through and learn from disappointment.

As Sirotnik and Berliner suggest, cultivating a moderate disposition requires us to confront our hypocrisy and our literalism and to alter one-sided views of ideals that fuel these tendencies. To accomplish this, we must be willing to engage in an honest and at times painful process of self-examination. Policy makers and researchers typically do not think about self-examination in the context of reform. An ''a part of/apart from'' view of ideals can change the conversation from one that focuses exclusively on procedural rationality as a tool for improving education to one that considers how improving education calls on us to improve ourselves. In this way, an ''a part of/apart from'' view of ideals can enhance Feuer's plea for moderation.

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25. Senator Edward M. Kennedy, quoting his brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Edward M. Kennedy, ''Eulogy to Robert F. Kennedy,'' in *Robert F. Kennedy: Promises to Keep,* ed. Arthur Wortman and Richard Rhodes (Kansas City, Missouri: Hallmark, 1969), 60.