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Chester E. Finn, Jr.: Troublemaker

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Both events drew Washington deeper into education. As the federal judiciary reshaped the racial and institutional contours of public schooling in the aftermath of *Brown*, federal funds, federal attorneys, federal laws and policies, even federal troops made their way into K–12 education, and America’s long-standing if not always honorable tradition of “local control” was threatened.

Though the first U.S. satellite went into space just four months later, Sputnik angst fostered the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which sought via federal funds to strengthen training in math, science, and foreign languages. Most of the money went to universities, but some dollars sluiced into the K–12 system to purchase equipment, renovate classrooms, train teachers, and develop tests and guidance programs. With that revenue came new rules and restrictions.

For a while, America fretted that it had an education quality problem. *The Pursuit of Excellence*, an influential 1958 Rockefeller Brothers Fund report spearheaded by John W. Gardner, argued that the nation must earnestly strive to develop its human capital and that it could pursue excellence without forfeiting equality.

Even pre-Sputnik, Gardner’s own Carnegie Corporation of New York had engaged former Harvard president James B. Conant to undertake a series of studies of K–12 education. The first of those, *The American High School Today*, appeared in 1959, urging wider propagation of “comprehensive” high schools featuring distinct “tracks” (college prep, vocational, etc.) for different types of students, who would be steered toward particular tracks according to their “aptitudes” and life plans. Far from equipping every young person with a broad, general education and thus spurring social mobility and equalizing opportunity, this view of the high school’s mission would help boys and girls “adjust” to whatever hand fate had dealt them—and keep them off the streets.

Historian Jeffrey Mirel explains that Depression-era joblessness and the accompanying influx of young people into school had fostered

a profoundly important shift in the nature and function of high schools. Increasingly, their task was custodial, to keep students *out of* the adult world (that is, out of the labor market) instead of preparing them for it. As a result, educators channeled increasing numbers of students into undemanding, nonacademic courses, while lowering standards in the academic courses that were required for

