

FOLLOW THE MONEY. IGNORE THE CHILDREN.

The corporate interests, political strategies, and classroom consequences behind school reform

SPECIAL EDUCATION / DIFFERENTIATION / ACCOUNTABILITY / PRIVATIZATION



THE QUESTION BENEATH THE PROMISE

Can a reform described as equitable also serve as an efficient way to consolidate services, enlarge teachers' responsibilities, and establish political support for privately operated schooling? The historical record contains evidence of each mechanism. It does not establish that they were all designed by a single secret group.

This report investigates a specific hypothesis: that the moral and political authority of special-education inclusion was useful to overlapping agendas—one associated with cost control and reorganized classroom labor, another with incremental expansion of private-school choice. A third agenda, standards-based accountability, helped provide the language and administrative infrastructure connecting the debates. The record shows intentional political framing and separately documented financial incentives. The claimed hidden coordination among all three remains an inference to test, not a finding.

REPORTING STANDARD

Facts, reported statements, and published findings are attributed to dated sources. Interpretations are explicitly identified. Claims about motives are tied to what participants actually said or did. The term "privatization" is used precisely: private tuition schools, privately managed public charters, contracting, and portable scholarships are related but legally different structures.

EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

Purpose. To trace the intellectual, political, statutory, organizational, and classroom history linking disability policy, academic grouping, differentiated instruction, accountability, and private education funding in the United States.

Method. Documentary historical analysis of laws, contemporaneous public statements, school-district audits, legislative investigations, peer-reviewed scholarship, government evaluations, and investigative reporting. Sources were selected for direct relevance, verifiability, and their ability to confirm or contradict proposed links. The work is a structured evidence synthesis, not an exhaustive systematic review or original causal study.

Principal findings. Milton Friedman openly proposed replacing a major part of government-run schooling with private enterprise; a 1989 federal-state summit and business coalition advocated accountability and restructuring; NCLB established school-failure consequences including a private-management option; a 2006 voucher advocate explicitly described targeted "toe-hold" programs as a politically useful route to expansion; and a 2011 Portland audit explicitly connected inclusion with financial benefits and the need for more teacher coordination. Federal evaluations later documented inadequate disability-rights disclosure in private-choice programs and substantial administrative demands on educators (Friedman, 1995; Bush & Governors, 1989; Bolick, 2006; Portland Public Schools, 2011; GAO, 2017).

Critical limits. Inclusion, academic de-tracking, and vouchers have different origins. The available evidence does not prove that inclusion was invented to make NCLB acceptable, that differentiation routinely causes achievement gaps to widen, or that a single covert group deliberately engineered public-school failure. Positive

evidence for differentiated instruction and some grouping reforms must be considered, as must the legal obligation to preserve individualized placements.

A GUIDE TO THE EVIDENCE

DOCUMENTED

A claim established by an original statute, recorded statement, grant agreement, published audit, or research report—for example, the Portland financial comparison or Bolick’s “toe-hold” formulation.

SUPPORTED INFERENCE

An interpretation that links independently documented facts through a credible causal or institutional mechanism, while acknowledging plausible alternatives—for example, that limited staffing could transfer differentiation work to classroom teachers.

UNRESOLVED HYPOTHESIS

A proposition requiring additional evidence of intention, coordination, implementation, or measurable effect—for example, that the primary goal of inclusive staffing changes in a particular district was to make its public schools less attractive.

A century of reform, arranged chronologically

The timeline follows three developments that eventually intersected: private influence over education; legal rights and restructuring in special education; and accountability, choice, and school management. The appearance of events in sequence does not by itself establish causation.

PERIOD	DOCUMENTED DEVELOPMENT
1902–13	Rockefeller’s General Education Board and Frederick T. Gates’s rural-school writings illustrate the philanthropic capacity to shape school priorities; no demonstrated direct operational link to NCLB.
1954–64	Brown v. Board; Prince Edward County, Virginia, closes public schools and supports private alternatives to resist desegregation; the Supreme Court condemns the arrangement (Griffin, 1964).
1955	Milton Friedman proposes vouchers as a means to separate public financing from government operation of schools (Friedman, 1995, retrospective republication).
1971–75	Powell’s corporate-influence memo (1971); Congress enacts the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), establishing federally protected special-education access.

PERIOD	DOCUMENTED DEVELOPMENT
1983–89	A Nation at Risk (1983), the Regular Education Initiative (1986), and the Bush-governors summit (1989) add urgency to standards, accountability, administrative flexibility, and broader general-education responsibility.
1989–97	The Business Roundtable publishes a national accountability blueprint; the 1994 federal education-law reauthorization and 1997 IDEA amendments expand standards, assessment participation, and curricular access.
1999–2002	Florida links F-rated schools to private-choice eligibility (1999); disability scholarship programs expand; the Education Trust helps build support for NCLB (2001); Congress enacts NCLB (2002).
2005–07	Post-Katrina New Orleans moves toward charter governance; Clint Bolick publicly explains “toe-hold” voucher tactics (2006); Congress and GAO investigate implementation and costs.
2011–19	Portland’s audit links inclusion and financial advantages (2011); government reviews document special-education administrative burden and voucher-rights disclosures; Walton grant records show charter placement incentives (2013–15).
2022–26	Arizona broadens educational savings accounts; Project 2025 explicitly cites Friedman; a federal scholarship tax credit is enacted; 2026 reporting traces disability-voucher expansion and access obstacles.

Timeline sources are detailed in the chapters and APA references. “Privately managed charter” is not synonymous with “private school”: a charter remains a public school subject to state and federal requirements.

1 | An old objective: private operation with public funding

The explicit market proposal

In 1955, Milton Friedman proposed a distinction that still animates school-choice policy: the government could finance schooling without operating the schools. In a later essay titled *Public Schools: Make Them Private*, he wrote that meaningful reconstruction required “privatizing a major segment of the educational system” and enabling a private, for-profit industry to develop (Friedman, 1995, executive summary). This is primary evidence of a stated privatization objective, not evidence that Friedman wanted children to learn less.

The most severe historical precedent for replacing public schools with private alternatives is also one of the least defensible. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, Prince Edward County, Virginia, closed its public schools rather than desegregate, while assistance flowed to private schooling. The Supreme Court held the closure-and-support arrangement unconstitutional (*Griffin v. County School Board*, 1964). The racial objective in that case must not be imputed to later choice proponents; the case establishes that governments have in fact used private-school funding as a substitute for public institutions.

Earlier philanthropy and explicit influence strategies

John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board, established in 1902, demonstrated how large private fortunes could affect educational priorities over decades. Frederick T. Gates's 1913 *The Country School of To-morrow* described wealthy reformers' ambitions for rural schooling; it is evidence of paternalistic educational visions, not proof of a link to modern disability policy (Gates, 1913). Lewis Powell's 1971 memorandum to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce then recommended a long-term business effort to influence campuses, textbooks, and public debate. The memo was about defending business and capitalism, not a plan specifically to dismantle special education (Powell, 1971).

Industry learns to organize

The Business Roundtable launched a ten-year education initiative in 1989, articulating common standards, results-focused accountability, assessment, performance incentives, and restructuring (Business Roundtable, 1989). The 1989 joint statement from President George H. W. Bush and the governors sought national goals, flexible resource use, annual reporting, and school restructuring; it explicitly discussed integrating students receiving compensatory and special-education services into regular classrooms with extra help (Bush & Governors, 1989).

These proposals laid out some of the policy vocabulary later seen in NCLB. Intellectual continuity and overlapping advocacy networks are documented. A clandestine, uninterrupted chain of control is not.

1971: organized business influence, openly recommended

Lewis F. Powell Jr. wrote a confidential 1971 memorandum to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce urging a sustained corporate campaign to influence public opinion, universities, textbooks, and even secondary education. That memorandum is a written proposal for business advocacy, not a document establishing a plan to manufacture special-education burdens. Its significance here is methodological: coordinated corporate persuasion was an explicit political project long before NCLB (Powell, 1971).

2 | Two different meanings of inclusion

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 arose from actual exclusion of students with disabilities. Its descendants under IDEA mandate a free appropriate public education and individualized placement. Federal regulations require a continuum including regular and special classes and supplementary services. Placement must rest on an individual education program and a knowledgeable team, not a blanket district model (34 C.F.R. §§ 300.115–300.116).

“Each public agency must ensure that a continuum of alternative placements is available”

34 C.F.R. § 300.115(a); U.S. Department of Education, current regulation.

Inclusive education can mean a supported placement in general education with a specialist, co-teacher, aide, modified curriculum, intervention, and deliberate planning. It can also be used loosely in local rhetoric to mean “fewer separate placements.” Those two arrangements are not equivalent. The law’s preference for educating students with nondisabled peers, where appropriate, is not an instruction to abolish special classes or to determine placement by cost.

When a moral premise becomes an administrative shortcut

The operational hazard is that policy slogans may obscure missing resources. If more pupils with individualized needs enter a general classroom, the assignment changes. The relevant indicators are class size, range of prior attainment, behavioral support, co-teaching availability, related services, planning time, IEP compliance, and measurable growth for students at different starting points. Without those data, “more inclusion” describes a placement statistic, not the quality of an education.

It is also possible for supported inclusion to reduce unnecessary segregation and improve achievement. Accordingly, the inference that inclusion is a cost-cutting strategy must be made district by district, and it cannot replace the student-by-student legal analysis IDEA requires.

3 | No Child Left Behind: equity language meets sanction architecture

The Education Trust describes its own role in creating the 2001 bipartisan coalition, noting that its work on achievement gaps helped shape NCLB and that it brought together legislators and business leaders (Education Trust, n.d., 2001 timeline entry). That is evidence that an equity rationale was not merely decorative. It mattered to supporters who wanted school performance disaggregated so underserved students would no longer be invisible in averages.

The same law also created consequential interventions. Under Section 1116 of Public Law 107-110, schools that persistently failed accountability targets could undergo restructuring. Among permissible choices were reopening as a public charter school, replacing staff, state operation, or contracting with a private management company to operate the public school (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

“Entering into a contract with an entity, such as a private management company”

No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, § 1116(b)(8)(B)(iii).

This provision created a real statutory link between an accountability designation and the possibility of privately managed operations. The Government Accountability Office later reported that relatively few restructuring schools actually selected private management or charter conversion; staffing and other options were more common (GAO, 2007). That limits claims that NCLB itself privatized the typical school.

The funding mismatch

At a 2007 Senate hearing, the Center on Education Policy reported that 80% of surveyed districts in 2005 said they had NCLB implementation costs not supported by federal funds. Reported costs included professional development, added staff, and administration of required services (U.S. Senate, 2007). These are self-reported district costs; they should not be turned into a national estimate of uncompensated teacher hours.

The political question is sharper than a simple “unfunded mandate” slogan: legislators could support an expansive promise, districts could face pressure to deliver, and classrooms could inherit tasks the original appropriations did not completely finance. That is a credible mechanism for workload transfer—not direct proof of a plan to cause school failure.

4 | The special-education voucher: a stated political foothold

Florida’s 1999 Opportunity Scholarship Program connected repeated failing grades to private-school voucher eligibility (Florida Legislature, 1999). Disability-specific choice programs followed and spread. Their politics differed from those of broad, universal vouchers: families who felt public services were inadequate could present urgent, sympathetic cases for alternative placement and funding.

2006: the strategy is described in writing

Clint Bolick, then president of the Alliance for School Choice, wrote an essay titled Toe-Hold Strategies on June 22, 2006. Instead of confronting teachers’ unions with universal plans, he described pursuing smaller programs for specific populations that were harder for legislators to oppose. He explained the political mechanism in three words: “choice begets choice” (Bolick, 2006).

WHY THIS SOURCE MATTERS

Bolick did not confess to manufacturing problems in public schools. He explicitly stated a political sequencing strategy: enact a narrow choice program and later expansion becomes easier. The same essay said this focus could serve needy children morally. Both parts belong in the account.

ProPublica’s 2026 investigation traced the use of disability scholarship programs as these initial openings, including contemporaneous legislative assurances that certain proposals were narrowly intended. It also quotes Howie Beigelman, speaking at a 2011 school-choice conference, as saying that “Special needs is a very easy way to get into this business” (as cited in Hawes & Richards, 2026). Beigelman told ProPublica he had not seen an intentional effort beyond helping children with disabilities. The remark provides evidence that disability programs were regarded as politically accessible; the explanation is part of the source record.

The irony of a choice some families cannot exercise

In November 2017, the GAO reviewed 27 operating voucher and education-savings-account programs. More than half specifically served students with disabilities. For 2016–17, 83% of students in disability-specific programs were enrolled in programs that gave no information, or inaccurate information, about certain changes in IDEA rights when a child moves from a public school to a private one (GAO, 2017). That percentage describes disclosure conditions in identified programs, not the share of all families who were deceived.

Hawes and Richards (2026) documented substantial gaps between voucher eligibility and actual private-school access for students with disabilities, including data indicating more than half of Florida private schools reported serving no students with disabilities. Private schools have different obligations from public districts. Public schools remain central providers for students with complex or costly needs. “Choice” can therefore expand in law while remaining sharply unequal in practice.

5 | Portland: inclusion and the price of a placement

The Portland Public Schools performance auditor produced one of the most direct documents connecting inclusion with finance. The August 2011 audit was explicitly titled Opportunities to Better Manage the Costs of Special Education in Portland Public Schools. The section on expanding general-education inclusion acknowledged potential academic advantages and anticipated more coordination among staff and instructional skill across a broader range of prior achievement (Portland Public Schools, 2011, p. 40).

“The inclusion of more students in general education environments also has positive financial benefits.”

Portland Public Schools, 2011, p. 40.

2008–09 PORTLAND COST COMPARISON	REPORTED SPECIAL-EDUCATION PLACEMENT COST
Self-contained classrooms (excluding Pioneer)	\$15,411 / student
Most of day in general education + Learning Center	\$2,719 / student

Interpretation constraint: These are average costs for different populations in different settings, not an experimentally measured saving from moving the same child. They do not control for severity of need, outcomes, or all general-education expenditures. Source: Portland Public Schools (2011, p. 40; Appendix B).

The audit did not recommend abolishing every separate placement. Indeed, it acknowledged a continuing need for a continuum of services and that some students perform better in more restrictive environments. It also discussed smaller ratios in a proposed Learning Center model—an important qualification against portraying the report as a simple call to cut support. Yet the document plainly places financial incentives beside a shift in instructional organization.

The investigative inference is conditional: when a district changes placements and reduces specialized expenditure without proportionate support in general classrooms, the apparent financial savings may reappear as teacher preparation time, inconsistent interventions, or unmet needs. Demonstrating that this actually occurred requires staffing and student-outcome data from the same district and years.

6 | The differentiation trap

A school can eliminate instructional sections with a scheduling decision. It cannot eliminate differences in what students already know.

Differentiated instruction asks teachers to adapt activities, pacing, explanation, content, materials, and assessment to student readiness and learning needs. As a principle it is reasonable. As an unfunded substitute for separate courses, specialist instruction, and additional adults, it may convert an institutional capacity problem into an individual teacher-performance problem.

Suppose a class includes students requiring intensive basic-skills intervention, students ready for grade-level lessons, and students well beyond them. The academic spread exists regardless of classroom structure. Consolidating sections raises the range of readiness within each class. Whether academic achievement gaps then widen over time is an empirical question: it depends on staffing, instructional design, starting achievement, exposure, and what the comparison arrangement would have delivered. Merely having a wide readiness range is not proof that learning gaps worsened.

What systematic research does—and does not—show

Smale-Jacobse, Meijer, Helms-Lorenz, and Maulana (2019) systematically reviewed research from 2006–2016 on within-class differentiation in secondary education. Their stringent criteria identified 14 papers representing 12 unique empirical studies. A majority reported positive effects, but approaches varied substantially and the authors concluded that high-quality evidence remains sparse. Their review supports differentiated instruction's promise and its uncertainty; it does not validate an unsupported "one teacher can do it all" premise.

Ziernwald, Hillmayr, and Holzberger (2022) synthesized 49 studies on differentiation for high-achieving students. Effects were predominantly positive but heterogeneous; teachers generally did not differentiate proactively or regularly for high achievers, and barriers included insufficient time, training, and resources. This supports a specific risk of academic underchallenge in poorly supported mixed-ability classrooms, not a universal claim that mixed-ability placement harms advanced students.

Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2011) conducted a randomized primary-school tracking experiment involving 121 schools in Kenya. They found that achievement-based grouping could benefit lower-achieving pupils by helping teachers adjust instruction to readiness. The randomized design supports a causal inference in that context; extrapolating directly to every U.S. grade or permanent track would exceed the study. Earlier U.S. observational work by Argys, Rees, and Brewer (1996) highlighted potential achievement trade-offs under de-tracking, but cannot settle modern causal effects on its own.

The time cannot be differentiated

GAO (2016) reported educator concerns about roughly one to two hours a day spent on special-education administrative duties, based on nongeneralizable focus groups and earlier studies. RAND’s nationally representative teacher survey found teachers reported averaging 53 hours of work per week during the 2022–23 school year—about 15 hours beyond contracted hours (Steiner et al., 2023). Neither estimate isolates the additional burden attributable to inclusion or differentiation. Together they establish that instructional redesign occurs in a workforce already facing substantial workload constraints.

TESTABLE CLAIM, NOT A SLOGAN

If a district eliminates remedial or advanced sections and asserts that differentiation replaces them, the evaluation must track each student group’s actual academic growth, teacher planning time, specialist contact, grouping flexibility, class size, and staff retention. The test is whether the new design supplies equally effective or better instruction—not whether its promotional language sounds inclusive.

7 | The networks around the classroom

Corporate policy access

A 2015 Washington Post investigation, based in part on emails obtained through public-records requests, documented how Jeb Bush’s Foundation for Excellence in Education interacted with state officials and corporate education donors and helped develop policy proposals relevant to businesses in testing, online education, and educational services (Layton, 2015). The foundation disputed the implication that donor interests directed its agenda. The interactions demonstrate access and a route for influence, not proof of unlawful arrangements or a coordinated plan to burden teachers.

Financing a workforce and leadership network

ProPublica reviewed documents from a \$20 million Walton Family Foundation grant to Teach For America and reported a differential payment: \$4,000 per traditional-public-school placement and \$6,000 per charter-school placement. The grant materials also described developing a leadership pipeline for education policy, advocacy, and politics (Waldman, 2019). These were grants to the organization, not the teachers’ salaries, and Teach For America disputed having a centrally dictated pro-charter placement strategy.

This evidence is significant because it combines an immediate financial incentive with a stated longer-term institutional objective. It does not show that a Walton-funded program directed Portland’s special-education audit or the original design of IDEA.

Post-Katrina New Orleans as a labor case study

After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans underwent a major transition to charter governance. Using state employment records, Lincove, Barrett, and Strunk (2017) documented the dismissal of approximately 4,300 pre-Katrina teachers. Publicly funded charter schools are still public schools, though their management and labor arrangements can differ substantially from district-operated schools. The dismissals demonstrate the scale of possible workforce change under restructuring; they do not demonstrate that an inclusion policy caused those dismissals.

The participants were connected by policy, not necessarily by a single command

ACTOR / NETWORK	DOCUMENTED ROLE	LIMIT OF INFERENCE
Milton Friedman	Explicit case for public financing and private school operation.	No evidence he designed IDEA or NCLB.
Bush administration / governors / Business Roundtable	Advocated accountability, restructuring and measurable outcomes.	Interests overlapped; secret joint intent is not established.
Education Trust / bipartisan NCLB coalition	Used achievement-gap evidence to build support for accountability.	No finding that civil-rights concerns were insincere.
Jeb Bush / Florida policymakers	Linked school ratings to vouchers; advanced disability choice and later national policy advocacy.	State programs and political motives vary.
Clint Bolick / choice advocates	Explicitly endorsed narrow voucher footholds before broad expansion.	Did not state a goal of harming student learning.
Walton Foundation / Teach For America	Documented charter-placement funding differential and leadership ambitions.	No direct link established to Portland's inclusion audit.
Portland school officials / audit team	Considered inclusion's achievement potential, workload needs and costs.	Cost comparison is noncausal; continuum endorsed.

8 | When the policy was made portable

2017: model legislation explains exactly how district money would move

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), whose model policies are developed by participating policymakers and private-sector representatives, published an Education Savings Account Act in 2017. Its proposed funding rule states: “The funds needed for a scholarship shall be subtracted from the state school aid payable to the student’s resident school district” (ALEC, 2017, § 3(B)). The model would permit spending on private-school tuition, tutoring, nonpublic online instruction, disability services, and approved financial-management firms. This is a proposed statutory transfer mechanism, not a finding that every adopting state used the text unchanged.

The endnotes are unusually informative about strategy and financial incentives. The authors said universal eligibility was their preference, while describing special-needs students and other groups as possible narrower starting populations. They also suggested ways legislators might limit eligibility to reduce budget exposure, and explicitly warned that labels such as “failing school” could be politically manipulated (ALEC, 2017, endnote i). This one source connects universal ambitions, targeted eligibility, fiscal planning, and concern about the credibility of accountability ratings—while also complicating any claim that every choice advocate wanted school-failure labels to be distorted.

Arizona expanded eligibility for education savings accounts in 2022, transforming a targeted program into a broad arrangement in which families can use state educational funds for approved alternatives including private-school expenses (Arizona Department of Education, 2022). The expansion reflects the legislative sequence Bolick had described sixteen years earlier: narrower scholarship programs can precede broader ones. Sequence alone does not prove the same legislators had identical private motives.

In the 2023 Mandate for Leadership, Lindsey Burke’s chapter on the Department of Education explicitly directed elementary and secondary policy toward the pathway Friedman outlined in 1955 and recommended widely available education savings accounts (Burke, 2023, p. 319). It also proposed eliminating the federal Department of Education. Closing that federal agency would not itself close public schools, which are operated primarily under state and local authority.

In 2025, Congress established a federal tax credit for eligible contributions to scholarship-granting organizations; the IRS describes a 2027 start and a tax credit of up to \$1,700 for qualifying individual contributions (Internal Revenue Service, 2026). This is a tax-credit structure, not an automatic deduction from local district budgets, but it adds another national policy mechanism supporting independently delivered educational services.

9 | The political use of “equity”: the question of misrepresentation

The case for investigating political misrepresentation is strongest where the public-facing rationale differs from a documented strategic objective. A disability scholarship can be promoted as a narrow remedy for families while its proponents openly value it as a legislative precedent. A school grading law can be promoted as transparency while also authorizing changes in management. Inclusion can be described as student-centered while an audit explicitly evaluates its fiscal benefits. These are dual-purpose policies, not necessarily fraudulent ones.

The broader claim that progressives were systematically “indoctrinated” into supporting these reforms is not established in the evidence reviewed. The relevant facts are narrower: the Education Trust acknowledges building a bipartisan NCLB coalition based on achievement gaps; Bolick directly framed targeted choice as a means of winning incremental votes; and the 2026 ProPublica investigation documented how disability-specific vouchers preceded general expansion. Those facts support analyzing selective framing and coalition incentives.

They do not prove knowing deception by the participating civil-rights organizations or a common covert motive.

Bolick's words make the crossover especially clear: after explaining the tactical usefulness of small choice programs, he addressed "Democrats who truly believe in social justice" and presented private schooling as a rescue from inadequate public options (Bolick, 2006). This is evidence of conscious persuasion aimed at a Democratic moral frame. It does not prove that any legislator or equity organization secretly disbelieved its stated educational arguments.

Renaming the institution is also a political act

Language was part of the struggle over legitimacy. Reporting on a 2002 speech by Dick DeVos described his recommendation that choice advocates use "government schools" rather than "public schools," emphasizing operation by government rather than public ownership and access (Strauss, 2020). That argument may express a genuine policy distinction; it is also a deliberate effort to reframe how an audience understands an institution. The existence of such messaging does not show that progressive teachers were indoctrinated. It does establish that advocates intentionally considered the persuasive effects of labels.

A stronger question than "Was everyone fooled?"

Which consequences were foregrounded in public argument, and which were left out? Were families told what IDEA rights might change? Were teachers shown how staffing would meet the added workload? Were taxpayers told which vendors could gain new revenue? Were lawmakers shown that a targeted voucher might become a universal system? A serious inquiry compares the public-facing messages to contemporaneous budgets, grant terms, staff memos, legislative models, and program outcomes.

10 | Competing explanations and inconvenient evidence

A circumstantial account becomes less credible, not more, when it ignores contrary facts. Disability inclusion has a genuine civil-rights history that long predates NCLB. IDEA's continuum and individualized-placement requirements protect students from one-size-fits-all administration in either direction. Some inclusive placements benefit students; some specialized placements are necessary. Some well-supported heterogeneous instruction produces strong outcomes; some ability grouping can reduce instructional mismatch.

Friedman and school-choice organizations made many privatization objectives public, weakening claims that the overall market agenda depended on secret coordination. NCLB allowed private management but GAO found its actual use among restructuring schools was limited (GAO, 2007). The Portland audit combined cost containment with a proposal for continued support services and warned against eliminating the placement continuum (Portland Public Schools, 2011). Finally, private-school access can be inadequate for students with complex disabilities, but public-school failures experienced by some families are also real and can explain sincere support for alternative education (Hawes & Richards, 2026).

These qualifications do not excuse weak implementation. They narrow the claims that can be made with integrity. A pattern of policy benefits is not proof that every benefit was intended. The credible allegation is

about the risks and incentives created by overlapping programs—and the public’s right to see the costs and outcomes clearly.

11 | What would confirm or disprove the hypothesis?

The most probative next records are district-specific and time-matched. For each jurisdiction that ended levels or expanded inclusion, collect school-board minutes, budget exhibits, staffing rosters, class schedules, special-education placements, contracted services, union agreements, teacher planning time, student progress distributions, and private-school transfers for at least three years before and after reform.

PREDICTION	OBSERVABLE TEST
H1 / Workload transfer	If staffing ratios and instructional sections fall as individualized demands rise, teachers should report more planning and coordination time, or diminished service intensity; compare with districts maintaining stronger supports.
H2 / Fiscal substitution	If placement changes were chiefly driven by cost, contemporaneous planning records should include projected savings, position reductions, or alternatives rejected for price rather than instructional suitability.
H3 / Political toe-hold	If disability vouchers serve as political openings, subsequent legislative expansions and advocacy materials should explicitly reference earlier targeted success; compare states that never adopted such programs.
H4 / Unequal access	If public programs remain the provider of last resort, students with complex needs should have lower access to participating private schools or face larger service gaps than peers; examine admission and rights notices.
H5 / Widening within-class gaps	If unsupported consolidation widens academic achievement distributions, longitudinal subgroup growth and within-class variance should worsen after implementation, relative to matched schools and pre-reform trends.

Matched comparison designs, interrupted time series, transparent pre-registration, and public release of codebooks would allow the question to be tested rather than merely debated. Staffing and spending changes should be adjusted for enrollment and student need. Special-education placement comparisons must account for selection; treating children with different disabilities as interchangeable is not valid analysis.

12 | The school that answers to every child

Equal educational worth never required identical instruction. It requires the resources and legal protections necessary to make educational opportunity real.

A defensible public education system should permit flexible grouping by demonstrated academic readiness, regularly reassessed; accelerated work for students who need it; targeted remediation without permanent low

expectations; and appropriate behavioral support that protects learning while honoring disability law. Special-education placements must remain individualized, supported, and chosen through legally required procedures. Sorting by disability label, stereotype, or perceived personal worth is neither sound pedagogy nor lawful policy.

Before a district removes separate instructional sections, it should disclose the anticipated staffing and fiscal consequences, the service model replacing them, how teachers will plan for multiple readiness levels, and what independent assessment will establish success. Before a state makes disability vouchers available, it should disclose how rights and services change and demonstrate that participating schools can actually serve the intended population. Before a policymaker praises efficiency, the accounting must include the labor and learning shifted outside the budget.

“A classroom is not equitable merely because its students occupy the same room.”

Analytical conclusion of this report; not an external quotation.

The unresolved question is not whether children were used as a political symbol. Bolick’s strategy establishes that vulnerable student populations could play a deliberate role in legislative sequencing. The deeper question is whether that political usefulness—and the budget savings claimed for certain classroom arrangements—became more influential than the quality and support of the education the children actually received.

The documented record supports close scrutiny. It does not license certainty about an unseen command structure. More substantial proof would appear in the papers, personnel decisions, contractual terms, and measured outcomes of individual districts and state legislatures. The investigative case should keep looking there.

Reporting methodology and limitations

Search and source selection

The inquiry prioritized U.S. federal legislation and regulation; state statutes; Supreme Court decisions; public school audits; reports from the Government Accountability Office; a dated school-choice advocacy essay; academic research on differentiation and grouping; and contemporary investigative reporting supported by documentary records. Search targets included “toe-hold strategies,” “disability vouchers,” “school restructuring private management,” “inclusion financial benefits,” and “differentiated instruction systematic review.” Documents were checked at the linked publisher, government, university, or nonprofit archive when available. This process is not a preregistered systematic review and may omit relevant scholarship or district examples.

Source hierarchy

Official law and recorded primary-source statements substantiate what was enacted or said. District audits substantiate the fiscal and managerial assessments in a specified place and year. GAO reports summarize samples and methods that cannot automatically generalize beyond their stated designs. Peer-reviewed studies provide either context-specific causal estimates or synthesized evidence, with different limits. Investigative reporting may reveal documents or interviews but is cited as secondary reporting unless the original record is independently reviewed.

Research safeguards

No comparison of differently placed student groups is interpreted as the causal effect of moving a student. No study of tracking in Kenya is treated as a universal estimate for the United States. No unsourced claim of an individual's hidden motive is stated as fact. No assertion that a teaching strategy “widened gaps” is made without data comparing actual student growth. The theory that progressives were intentionally deceived remains testable but unproven by the sources cited here.

Quotation policy

Direct quotations in this report are brief and attributed to original law, published primary documents, or identifiable published reporting, with statutory sections, page numbers, or document names as locators where feasible. Webpage paragraphs can shift as publishers revise formatting. Full linked citations are collected below in APA-style author–date form. Titles and direct URLs were checked during preparation; future link rot is possible.

EVIDENCE LEDGER / KEY FINDINGS

ASSESSMENT	CLAIM	BASIS / LIMIT
Established	Private-sector schooling was an explicit desired destination for Friedman (1995).	Published advocate proposal
Established	Business organizations publicly pursued standards/accountability reform (1989–92).	Business Roundtable document
Established	NCLB permitted private management as one restructuring option (2002).	Statute; GAO review
Established	Bolick described incremental voucher “toe-hold” strategy (2006).	Signed published advocacy essay
Established	Portland associated inclusion with financial benefits and added coordination demands (2011).	Independent district performance audit
Established	GAO found serious disability-rights notification problems in choice programs (2017).	Federal audit with defined program population

ASSESSMENT	CLAIM	BASIS / LIMIT
Supported inference	Insufficient staffing may displace differentiation work onto teachers.	Audit and workload findings; mechanism unmeasured
Unresolved	Reforms were orchestrated to make public schools fail intentionally.	No direct coordination or intent record established
Unresolved	Eliminating levels generally widens learning gaps.	Requires longitudinal U.S. comparison data

References

APA 7-style reference list. Web links are embedded in citation titles or DOI strings; select a title to open its source. “n.d.” indicates that the cited organizational timeline page lacks a stated publication date.

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