

The Children in Room E4



"A spectacular accomplishment. This wonderful, complex, subtle, and intelligent work digs deep into the crisis facing urban education. A very important book." —JONATHAN KOZOL

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The Children in Room E4: American Education on Trial Susan Eaton

With our nation's urban schools growing more segregated every year, Susan Eaton set out to see whether separate can ever really be equal. An award-winning journalist, Eaton spent four years at Simpson-Waverly Elementary School, an all-minority school in Hartford, Connecticut. Located in the poorest city in the wealthiest state in the nation, it is a glaring example of the great racial and economic divide found in almost every major urban center across the country.

The Children in Room E4 is the compelling story of one student, one classroom, and one indomitable teacher, Ms. Luddy. In the midst of Band-Aid reforms and hotshot superintendents with empty promises, drug dealers and street gangs, Ms. Luddy's star student, Jeremy, and his fellow classmates face tremendous challenges both inside and outside of a school cut off from mainstream America.

Meanwhile, across town, a team of civil rights lawyers fight an intrepid battle to end the de facto segregation that beleaguers Jeremy's school and hundreds of others across America.

From inside the classroom and the courtroom, Eaton reveals the unsettling truths about an education system that leaves millions of children behind and gives voice to those who strive against overwhelming odds for a better future.

The Children in Room E4: American Education on Trial Details

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Author : Susan Eaton

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Emma says

The topic is compelling, and Eaton does a good job breaking down the intricacies of the court case and of Connecticut's town-based school funding system. *The Children in Room E4: American Education on Trial* is sadly still relevant over a decade later; the 2016 CT Superior Court ruling on CCJEF v. Rell and the 2018 CT Supreme Court overturning of that ruling is evidence of that relevance. The book is at its best during the sections about "Jeremy," the real-life personification of the problems that still exist in urban school districts after *Sheff v. O'Neill*. I do think Eaton missed a part of the problem with Hartford, which is the building of I-84 between downtown and the North End--but then again, one cannot expect Eaton to tackle **EVERYTHING** that has gone wrong with the city. If you enjoyed the narrative aspects of this book and are interested in learning more about Hartford from a very different perspective and time period, I recommend *Girls of Tender Age: A Memoir*.

Tammy says

While the primary focus of this book is racial segregation in schools (the stats are stunning) for me the bigger story is the disconnect between impoverished schools and the rest of America. I also think anyone who believes we all have an equal opportunity to be successful in this country should read this book. It is an easy, if frustrating, read with relatable characters.

Matt says

This book read smoothly, and Eaton's a strong writer and reporter. It held special interest to me since it's about Connecticut, and it's quite relevant to some work I'm doing in law school right now. That said, my own biases interfered somewhat with my overall enjoyment of the book. Eaton's a good enough reporter that the story she tells is complex despite her attempts to tell a simple anti-testing morality tale, but her instinct is very much to criticize standardized testing. In fairness to her, she writes from anecdote and not generalization, and the anecdote is indeed troubling -- it sounds like the school she visited adopted many of the worst strategies for dealing with a standardized test regime (kill and drill all the time, discouragement of creative thinking, etc.). When she rhapsodizes about a suburban school near the one in Hartford she is writing about, though, I couldn't help wondering -- what are the test scores like at that school? My strong hunch is that they're pretty darn good. So why doesn't Eaton realize that excellent teaching (like the instruction described at the suburban school) leads to learning without eliminating test score gains? The issue isn't the existence of tests, it's the way people respond to them. After all, there's more than one way to eat a Reese's cup, and we should be arguing about the best way to eat it and not whether to eat it at all (mmm...chocolate and peanut butter).

All in all, though, a good book and a valuable attempt to connect the legal side of a desegregation case (which is described excellently, by the way) with the practical impact the law has on kids.

Elizabeth says

Compelling overview of the Sheff case and the issue of school desegregation in Hartford. Sadly, I'm not sure how much has changed in the 10 years since the book was published.

Katie Fuller says

Excellent. Eaton breaks down how Hartford, CT went from one of the wealthiest cities in the US to one of the most devastated by following a path of redlining and white flight. Sadly, Hartford's children are the ones who suffered this de facto segregation. The book focuses on the landmark Supreme Court case *Sheff V O'Neill*, that was decided in 1996 and then revisited in the early 2000s. It is an exposé of many sorts, but, most importantly, of a court system that never followed through on its promise to integrate schools within four years.

Nshslibrary says

The Children in Room E4 by Susan Eaton is a book that follows young Jeremy through an average day in a life of poverty, while providing insight and critiques on the current day education system. As Jeremy, a top student in his 4th grade class, works through schooling as he is shadowed by Eaton whom interviews his peers, teachers, and family members for a clear understanding on education in impoverished cities. Many interviews are held with Mrs. Luddy, the 4th grade teacher at Simpson-Waverly Elementary School. Eaton does a superb job at providing information from very personal sources like the main character's teacher and grandmother, who was left to parent him alone. The 'No Child Left Behind' act is looked into, which states that every child in Massachusetts is promised an education. Although it is clearly highlighted that not all students across America have access to an education because of personal setbacks like race, home life, and the schooling that each child is filtered into. This is examined in depth throughout the book and is also backed up by well researched facts while being written in a clear, interesting way.

Eaton establishes a close relationship with Jeremy, a great way at looking into education throughout Hartford, plus giving her first hand information on the area, and the people around her. The first half of the book is mostly based around Jeremy, how he gets to school, his home life, and his school life. This was the part I found most interesting. Throughout the second half of the book it starts to focus more on the political aspect of the educational system, an important but less enthralling part of the story. Although this part did not interest me as much, it is still very well written and filled with primary sources, interviews, and commentaries on the education system through the de facto segregation court case. This information all leads back to Eaton's assessment of the current day educational system very well, and provides many answers and facts to the reader.

Overall, author and journalist Susan Eaton writes an empowering book that brings many difficulties in education to the forefront of problems in America. Smoothly written, and a well told story that displays Eaton's true love and care for children it is no wonder that the front and back of the book are filled with more than positive criticism of the book. ~ Student: Jason M.

Steph (loves water) says

Amazing. Well-researched and eye-opening book about inner city education and the differences between the city and the suburbs. An eye-opener for anyone who believes that educated children are the hope for our future.

DW says

I picked up this book because it was on a display at the library and it looked readable. It starts off engagingly, with a third grader from the projects who is amazingly bright and mature. Over the course of the book, we follow his third and fourth grade years with Ms. Luddy. We also hear about the court case that was brought against the state of Connecticut that alleged that the state was denying an adequate education to the kids in the city of Hartford, because the schools were effectively segregated. I almost put down the book at the legal stuff. I think that the case took an interesting tactic to try to address the problem of kids not learning, but unfortunately it did not solve any problems. Also, the case had basically no effect on the lives of the kids in the class, so the book seemed a little disjointed when it jumped back and forth between the case and the classroom.

I've read news reports about such things, but it never struck me just how boring the school experiences are for these kids. They do test prep, all day, with no science, social studies, recess, or summer break. Even more eye-opening for me was the description of how horribly the children are treated by some staff members. Substitute teachers scold them for asking definitions of words in their assignments, and a janitor arbitrarily forbids them to talk to each other at lunch. What stuck with me most was day the class visits a 4th grade class in the suburbs. The kids are amazed at the sight of the Connecticut River (which they live right next to), their vocabulary during a joint writing assignment is far behind that of their peers, and at least one kid doesn't know how to swing on a swing set (they can't play outside for fear of being shot).

This book makes the case that mixing school populations so that no schools are more than 40% poor kids would raise the learning level of the poor kids without slowing down the rich kids. It's an interesting idea, though it seems like a political non-starter.

Terry says

You know, this book really annoyed me. Just from a narrative standpoint, it's clear that the author took her experience reporting on *Sheff v. O'Neill*, a lawsuit that essentially accused the Connecticut government of forcing segregated schools, and expanded it into book-length form. The book then becomes two different books squished into one--a book about the court case, and, a book about an "inner city" elementary school. While Eaton seems to admire the people behind the lawsuit, it's a really meaningless gesture that is all the more apparent, whether that was her intent or not, in the other parts of her book.

What bothered me is the court case ends up being a ridiculous exercise in rhetoric, and it drags on for over 16 years. SIXTEEN YEARS. By the time it sputters, gasps, and dies, the original plaintiff meant to be helped by desegregation has dropped out of high school and had a child of his own. The case does create change: a few magnet schools open in the city, drawing equally from the "inner city" and the white, affluent suburbs, and they (the students and schools) seem to thrive. However, they enroll a TINY PERCENTAGE of

students. While this is a positive change, it's so small, affects so few students, and does nothing to address the problems still affecting thousands of impoverished families, that the time and energy spent on the court case is really shameful. In fact, one of the very first people to push for the court case in the end says he wishes they had spent their time and energy somewhere else.

The problem is that a group of very earnest people looked around at the problems of schools in impoverished neighborhoods that serve deeply impoverished children and decided that SEGREGATION is the problem. This is not the 1960s. Poverty is a problem that needs to be attacked on many fronts at once, and taking kids from the inner city and plopping them into suburban schools---the ONLY goal of the lawsuit in the first place---is no solution at all.

The other half of the book follows a few years in the lives of a group of children at a school quite similar to the school in Linda Perlstein's excellent *Tested* (a superior book, in my opinion). Clearly many children across the country do nothing all day except drill for standardized tests. In each book, the students, teachers, and authors also visit a middle- or upper-middle class school, and the disparities are heartbreaking. In these schools, the children do CRAZY REVOLUTIONARY THINGS like have recess and science classes and go on field trips and have gardens and playground equipment and read actual literature. And guess which students do better in the long run? Hint: it's not the pathetic third graders forced to sit in school for up to ten hours a day, practicing bubbling in standardized test forms.

What's even more heartbreaking about Eaton's book is that the students who the lawsuit was supposed to "help" suffer terribly. They get no help at all from the lawsuit. All that time and money could have been spent much more productively, but it's easier on one side to just create a "new, better!" standardized test and on the other to decide to file a lawsuit that might look good on an intern's resume but is completely useless to the day-to-day lives of the people the lawsuit is supposed to be "about".

Jennifer says

This book offers a well-written, eye-opening look at the problems of concentrated poverty and racial segregation in America's cities and schools. The 4th grade children that the author follows in inner-city Hartford, CT are so expressive and curious, (and acutely aware of their surroundings and lack of opportunity), that it leaves you feeling so sad that most can't find a way into a better school environment, despite the attempts of their parents, teachers, and even the author. This book is honest about the complexities involved in trying to desegregate public schools in urban America, but the conclusion that something needs to be done is self-evident. Each year, the divide between white and minority; wealthy and poor, only grows wider, and children bear the burden of this gap.

Ruth says

This is a book on Hartford, CT. I was reading it at the same time as Richard Rothstein's book, *The Color of Law*. It's about how extreme residential segregation reinforces poverty and lack of educational equity in an urban area in the wealthiest state in the wealthiest nation in the world. The book develops on two parallel tracks. The author interviewed people connected to a lawsuit to end educational segregation in the city. She also embedded herself in a great teacher's third and fourth grade classroom in a segregated urban school. The children in the classroom get to know the author and she gets to know them. I think what I liked best about

the book was the author's ability to get to know individual people. I have to find a way to incorporate this material in my college course on gender, race and class, but I'm not sure how yet.

Kirsta Bowman says

This book was eye opening into the extreme segregation of schools between city and suburbs.

Amanda says

In *The Children in Room E4* (year) by Susan Eaton, the author, a journalist who spends many hours observing in an inner city classroom in a northeastern urban center, is appalled at the way adults treat students at the school. She recounts such disturbing incidents in the passage below:

In the corridor at Simpson-Waverly, the dour (white) chaperone lightly but repeatedly slapped the hands of first graders who sucked their thumbs. A (black) former vice-principal hollered at a second grader, 'you should be ashamed to say my name. Don't you speak my name. Don't you dare. And get that foolish hat off your foolish head.' A (black) substitute teacher hurled insults at a fifth grader: 'lazy, rude, foolish.' Another substitute (black) screamed, 'Shut up.' A third substitute teacher (Asian) declined conversation with children. A visibly exasperated, young (white) teacher pushed a whiny, jumpy child against the wall (hard) and back into a line. I overheard a teacher (black) say scoldingly to a child in the hallway, 'What is wrong with you? There is something very wrong with you.' [year:page number]

After several weeks of teaching at Dunbar, I was appalled to find myself making the type of negative, mean statements to children that I would never have imagined I could make. "Shut up" was the statement most common and most upsetting to me, though the kids were not surprised to hear it. Other Teach For America members and I would excuse this type of abuse by saying, correctly, that many other teachers at our schools struck students or doled out other unacceptable and illegal forms of corporal punishment, creating a school wide environment in which no appropriate or legal punishment was feared by students. Two and a half years after leaving Dunbar, it is still painful for me to read Eaton's account from an academic perspective with the knowledge that I am guilty of the same sort of atrocious acts.an academic perspective with the knowledge that I am guilty of the same sort of atrocious acts.

Jack says

I had to read this book for my EDTE 314 class, *Applying Learning Theories in a Diverse Setting*. It was not the most interesting thing in the world, and while I was reading it the details just seemed to drone on for endless pages. I have to say I really don't care about the color tie which the Supreme Court just was wearing... can we just get on to the arguments or decision maybe?

I enjoyed the overall meaning of the book however, which was the importance of desegregation in school systems and necessity for deemphasizing standardized testing. It used a classroom which the author was observing and some really interesting kids to prove these points.

Caroline says

Thought provoking. A great mix of policy review with a human face.
