

## Book club guide

*Other People's Children: The Battle for Justice and Equality in New Jersey's Schools* tells the story of New Jersey's decades-long struggle to provide an equal education to rich and poor children. The book interweaves an account of legal and political wrangling over laws and money with the life stories of the 21 urban schoolchildren who were named plaintiffs in the state's two school funding lawsuits. *Other People's Children* is a work of non-fiction, written in an accessible, journalistic style for an audience of general readers, not academics or specialists.

Here are some questions your book club may want to use as starting points for discussion. Feel free to e-mail author Deborah Yaffe with questions or comments, or to arrange a book club appearance.

1. In her introduction, Yaffe suggests that equal educational opportunity is uniquely important in American democracy. Do you agree?
2. Harold Ruvoldt Jr., the lawyer who filed *Robinson v. Cahill*, New Jersey's first school funding lawsuit, originally wanted a white plaintiff, because he thought race would be a distraction from his central argument: that the school funding system discriminated on the basis of wealth. Later, in *Abbott v. Burke*, the plaintiffs' lawyers again downplayed race. Do you think racial considerations should have played a larger role in New Jersey's school finance battles?
3. Marilyn Morheuser is an important figure in the *Abbott* story. Do you find her admirable? Why or why not?
4. Morheuser pursued the *Abbott* litigation with single-minded dedication. What were the costs of this single-mindedness? Could she have achieved as much as she did at a smaller cost?

5. What role did family background play in the lives of the *Robinson* and *Abbott* plaintiff schoolchildren? What role did schooling play? Which do you think was more important?
6. What role does money play in determining school quality? What role do leadership and management play? Which do you think is more important?
7. How important should test scores be in assessing whether a school system is succeeding or failing? Should other measures be given equal weight, or more weight?
8. The New Jersey Supreme Court is often described as liberal and activist. Do the court's actions in *Robinson* and *Abbott* bear out this characterization? Do you approve of the court's level of involvement?
9. What are the benefits and drawbacks of achieving social change through litigation, rather than through political give and take?
10. What does New Jersey's story tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of democratic politics? Did democracy succeed or fail here?