Teachers Unions
The good, the bad, and the ugly

The Worm in the Apple: How the Teacher Unions Are Destroying American Education
by Peter Brimelow

As reviewed by George Mitchell

Peter Brimelow aims high. In The Worm in the Apple, he seeks to emulate The History of Standard Oil, the legendary effort by Ida Tarbell that helped to usher in the antitrust movement a century ago.

While Tarbell’s villain was Standard Oil, Brimelow’s culprits are the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). However, though many of his concerns are valid and well documented, Brimelow is unlikely to earn a spot on bookshelves next to Tarbell. Unlike the self-effacing Tarbell, Brimelow overreaches with his rhetoric, distracting from and often obscuring his message.

For example, Brimelow considers teacher union leaders “commissars of [an] American Red Army.” The NEA “has chosen to metastasize into the National Extortion Association.” It exhibits a “persistent streak of left-wing loonyism.” Brimelow cites the words of “Chairman Mao Tse-Tung” to demonstrate that K–12 schools reflect “the most prominent outbreak of socialism on the American scene.”

Framed this way, Brimelow will at best reinforce the sentiments of those readers who already accept his basic premise. At the same time, he will be largely discounted by those whose support is required for real change to occur.

Brimelow is at his best in describing the broader historical context in which the teacher unions operate. He demonstrates how collective bargaining for teachers has produced labor agreements that stifle innovation and risk taking. He makes it clear that the dramatic rise in influence enjoyed by the teacher unions has coincided with stagnant and unacceptable levels of student performance.

Brimelow laments that little of this is understood by mainstream America. He correctly singles out the news media, where reports of the teacher unions’ activity and influence are woefully inadequate. He is on the money in claiming that the teacher/school board conclave, “effectively excludes other interested parties, such as parents and taxpayers.”

But what to do? Brimelow’s principal remedies involve a menu of anti-union legislation: repeal collective-bargaining laws for teachers; eliminate teacher tenure; enact “right to work” laws; and so on.

Brimelow lets these suggestions crowd out his other proposals—proposals that might be both more feasible and more effective. For example, rather than questioning the right of teacher unions to exist, Brimelow could have shown how effective unions are not inherently at odds with the creation of high-quality products. The auto industry, a leading example, illustrates how a market driven by real consumer choice, but with a heavily unionized work force, can function well. Instead, Brimelow’s concluding chapter seems to instruct readers to support school choice not so much because doing so might improve the schools, but because it will annoy teacher unions.

In the context of my own study of Milwaukee’s teacher union (with Howard Fuller and Mike Hartmann), Brimelow’s dire description of the national scene rings true. All the more disappointing, then, that his book reads more like Ann Coulter than Ida Tarbell.

–George Mitchell is a public policy consultant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

As reviewed by Julia E. Koppich

Will The Worm in the Apple someday become the answer to a question on the Advanced Placement exam in U.S. history? The author, financial journalist Peter Brimelow, hopes so. Brimelow considers himself a muckraker, the term coined by Theodore Roosevelt to describe writers who highlighted...
corruption in government. In a 1906 speech, Roosevelt branded some of the muckrakers’ methods sensationalist and irresponsible—an apt description for Brimelow’s book.

Brimelow uses the plural to refer to teacher unions, calling them collectively the “Teacher Trust.” But he focuses on the National Education Association (NEA) and especially on that organization’s California affiliate—for which, conveniently for him, reform is often anathema. To be sure, Brimelow makes some valid criticisms of unions—the bargaining of sometimes too-rigid employment contracts; some unions’ “just say no” attitude toward reform; proposals for more authority without accompanying responsibility for results. But he also could have found counterexamples. He just didn’t look very hard.

Teachers embraced unionism for a simple reason: they wanted to be involved in shaping the conditions of their employment. In a recent survey by Public Agenda, more than 80 percent of teachers said that without unions, they would be vulnerable to the vagaries of school politics, and their salaries and working conditions would be much worse.

Brimelow suggests repealing collective-bargaining laws so that “school boards would no longer be forced to deal with the union just because a majority of the teachers voting in a certification election supported it.” He is half right. Collective-bargaining laws do need to be revamped, but not as an exercise in limiting democracy.

Brimelow accuses unions of “opposing every reform idea that comes down the pipeline.” What he means is that unions oppose those reform ideas that he favors. I was heartened when he referred to the reform efforts of the teacher unions in Montgomery County, Maryland and Denver, but dismayed by his flip dismissal of them.

Montgomery County’s school district and union are focusing on standards-based professional development and the evaluation of teachers by principals, with the goal of improving student achievement. The joint work of the Denver Public Schools and Denver Classroom Teachers Association has resulted in a proposed compensation system, to be voted on by teachers in March 2004, that includes differentiated pay. However, these facts don’t fit the story Brimelow wants to tell, so the facts are given short shrift.

Likewise, many of the ideas we regard today as education reform’s conventional wisdom—linked standards and assessments, consequences for poor performance, testing new teachers, paying some teachers more than others, and charter schools—were given prominent public voice by a teacher union leader, the late Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers. However, this doesn’t square with Brimelow’s worldview, so he ignores it.

While harsh on teacher unions, Brimelow makes excuses for journalists whose coverage of the unions is weak or limited: “On those rare occasions when reporters do cover the teacher unions, they find themselves overwhelmed by the arcane and incomprehensible.” Are teacher unions really more complicated than energy market manipulation, insider stock trading, or new medical advances, all of which journalists have covered with distinction?

Throughout the book, Brimelow uses a variety of linguistic devices to drive home his points. But his overall language soon grate on the nerves. He refers, for example, to segments of the NEA as “coven of cranks” and to some union staffers as—this is original—goons. If he has a serious message to communicate, his tone diminishes it.

Sometimes Brimelow is just plain mean for the sake of being mean. In describing an NEA convention, he says, “You can’t avoid feeling that you’ve stumbled into a sort of indoor rally for human hot-air balloons.” At first the reader might think that Brimelow is making a semi-humorous reference to the tone of the floor debate. No—he’s referring to the delegates’ physiognomy: “An alarming proportion of attendees wobble and waddle with thighs like tree trunks.”

At best, Brimelow can be accused of false advertising. His argument is not that teacher unions are destroying American education, but that they labor long and hard to preserve the status quo. If true, this too is an unpardonable sin. But this book contains so little about education—virtually nothing about classrooms, schools, or districts—even that point gets lost.

In fact, Brimelow uses teacher unions as the device to reach his real agenda: “The problem with America’s government school system [Brimelow’s name for public schools] is socialism. The solution is … the introduction of a free market.” Taking on teacher unions may get readers’ blood boiling—union-bashing has become sport in some circles—but Brimelow’s real objective is to write an anti–public school polemic.

—Julia E. Koppich is president of J. Koppich & Associates, a San Francisco–based education consulting firm.
Uncivil War
A bloodless account of a bitter battle

California Dreaming: Reforming Mathematics Education
by Suzanne M. Wilson
Yale University Press, 2003, $29.95; 320 pages.

Reviewed by Ralph A. Raimi

California’s “math wars,” the struggle over what is sometimes called the “new New Math,” illustrate all the ills and disagreements that have plagued American education for the past century. They have been but a chapter in the efforts by “progressive” educators to legislate equality of results in the schools via the dumbing down of the curriculum. In place of academic achievement, progressives offer self-esteem and racial harmony as the principal prizes, though there are others, especially for the bloated education establishment itself.

Unfortunately, Suzanne Wilson, a professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, addresses neither the politics nor the mathematics of the debate (if a “math war” can be called a debate) with enough insight to shed light on the broader trends in America’s schools. Nor will her book help to instruct the public or teachers of mathematics on the fundamental issues that were at stake in California. Her generous attempt at an even-handed, sympathetic account portrays the math wars as an unnecessary fight that can be ended by a return to civility, as if misunderstanding among decent and disinterested parties were the problem.

California has been unique among the states in having a strong legal structure allowing it to require essentially all its public schools to teach mathematics according to “Standards” periodically published by the State Board of Education. Similar constraints are gradually becoming law in other states, but during the period from 1980 to 2000 California was the only real example. This constraint is applied through state-supplied textbook money for grades K through 8. The details are intricate and the stakes very high, both for the theorists, who want their view of education to prevail over the whole state, and for the publishers, who must satisfy the state’s requirements in order to win entrance to the enormous textbook market.

During the years following the ill-fated “New Math” initiatives of the 1960s, there was no visible national mathematics curriculum; but in 1980 the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) published the manifesto An Agenda for Action, followed by a 1989 document generally referred to as “The NCTM Standards.” Taken together, these two documents provided firm support for the progressive view of what to call mathematics and how to teach it.

The NCTMs progressivism called for teachers not to teach explicitly, but to elicit students’ response to problems, generally “real life” problems. Teachers should be nurturing, not judgmental; no child should be elevated above the others; testing itself is suspect as punishing the losers. Even a too-detailed announcement of required academic content is seen by NCTM, as its own 1989 standards attested, as an implied attack on the deprived and downtrodden.

In 1985 and 1992, California adopted “Frameworks” that embodied the NCTM Standards, thereby establishing progressivism in the state’s textbooks and examinations. A few years’ experience with these programs generated a vigorous public reaction, mainly from middle-class parents anxious about the intellectual vacuity of the new programs and the implications for the future of their children. As a result, in 1997 a new State Board of Education called a halt to the movement and approved a set of more rigorous state standards, standards that could not be satisfied by the progressivist textbooks that had won the education establishment’s endorsement.

The education authorities were not unresponsive. The California superintendent of education and even the National Science Foundation official in charge of financing the new math initiatives of the 1990s launched a campaign mischaracterizing the new California standards as a return to rote memorization and other evils of “traditional” mathematics teaching, as if pedagogical style were the issue. In fact, pedagogy itself was not addressed at all in the new California standards. More to the point, though not mentioned explicitly, was that the new standards would make it impossible for those content-impaired, NCTM-approved math programs to be continued in California.

The State Board of Education’s most infuriating ploy in this game of hardball politics was surely the hurried and unexpected commissioning of a last-minute rewrite of an establishment-sponsored standards draft. Even though the revision was written by four distinguished Stanford mathematicians, the educators’ propaganda machine persuaded...
much of the mathematics education community that the new state standards were purveying mindless rituals as mathematics, to the destruction of students’ “higher order thinking skills.”

Those already familiar with the politics surrounding the controversial 1997 adoption of the new California mathematics standards can doubtless tease such details out of Wilson’s rather bland account, for she duly notes the various commissions, frameworks, surveys, and reports as they succeeded one other during the stormy period from 1980 to 2000. But it is all set in deliberately neutral terms, implying that this debate is always an honest one, which it is not.

Wilson’s account fails to describe the enormous budget of deception and ignorance that underlies so much of the politics in question. Had she been able to have amplified her story immeasurably beyond her diary of their public pronouncements. The unpublicized infighting of such people has had as much practical consequence at the schoolroom level as all the theoretical apparatus of the schools of education.

All told, California Dreaming gave me the feeling of reading a history of the Protestant Reformation that did not mention the genuine death-dealing armies in the fields of central Europe, as if the battalions were engaged in a learned dispute concerning interpretation of the Gospels. For the reader who wishes to understand the fundamentals of today’s math wars and the baneful progressivist influence on American schools in general, a history such as Wilson’s, though an excellent straightforward chronology, is both too much and too little. As a healthful supplement I should like to recommend an earlier, polemical view of the major problem that confronts us in education: Albert Lynd’s Quackery in the Public Schools, a neglected 1953 book whose title is not yet out of date.

—Ralph A. Raimi is a professor emeritus of mathematics at the University of Rochester.

### Just the Facts

**A guide for school researchers**

**School Figures: The Data Behind the Debate**

by Hanna Skandera and Richard Sousa

*Hoover Institution, 2003, $15; 342 pp.*

Reviewed by Chester E. Finn Jr.

The education field sometimes seems flooded with numbers, but all too often they’re numbing, obscure, of uncertain accuracy, and hard to track down. How often have you found yourself fumbling for an apt datum to illustrate a point, or wondering what’s the truth about (say) school spending, teacher salaries, or math achievement scores over recent years or decades? You can, of course, rummage around on innumerable websites or try to heft the bulky compilations of the National Center for Education Statistics, but such exercises are often painful and frustrating and sometimes just plain fruitless.

To the rescue come Hoover research fellows Hanna Skandera and Richard Sousa with a wonderfully manageable and well chosen volume of data. It’s organized under six big headings—schools, teachers, achievement, expenditures, “school reform” and “students and their families.” Better still, under each heading the authors offer a handful of “propositions” that, in their judgment, support the data, such as “Across-the-board teacher salary increases may not stand alone as an education reform solution”; or “Summer school gives clear evidence that accountability is changing the way we educate.” Each proposition is followed by a mini-essay, then by a few well selected and nicely presented charts, graphs, tables, and maps that supply the supporting data.

You may well encounter propositions that you yearn to debate. Did you know, for example, that the share of GDP spent on K–12 education has hardly budged since 1970? That teachers’ salaries are but 40 percent of school expenditures today (compared with 51 percent in 1961)? That the average elementary school has more than tripled in size in the past 50 years? That school violence is declining? Find these facts and more in School Figures, a reference work that all school reformers should keep readily at hand.
Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care, by John H. McWhorter (Gotham Books).

“We must have the attitude that every child in America, regardless of where they’re raised or how they’re born, can learn,” President George W. Bush once observed.

The president talks funny. So do we all. McWhorter has thought through the larger implications of this simple fact: Written speech is nothing like spoken speech. The written word, at its best, is ordered and logical; spoken language, if not prepared in advance, will wander into incoherent, ungrammatical waters.

But America, unlike other nations, is trying to replace written speech with spoken speech, glorifying the latter as less elitist and more in touch with the nation’s diversity. The consequences are dreadful, says McWhorter, not only for our language but also for our civil order. As a linguist, McWhorter knows that dictionaries and the rules of grammar neither can nor should imprison a language. But he explains to teachers why students need to be taught how to write properly. It is an unnatural, but rewarding, act.

Judging School Discipline: The Crisis of Moral Authority, by Richard Arum (Harvard Press). Fifteen years ago, Gerald Grant’s influential The World We Created at Hamilton High illustrated how efforts to expand the rights of students had undermined educators’ ability to run their schools. Grant ended his account on an optimistic note, suggesting that new compromises had created a satisfactory equilibrium.

In a compelling new account, however, Richard Arum, a New York University sociologist, argues otherwise. Drawing on his analysis of more than 1,200 court cases and decades of data, Arum finds that overreaching by the courts has crippled the moral authority of educators. The mere threat of lawsuits, Arum argues, keeps teachers and administrators from taking the steps necessary to ensure safe and orderly schools. He concludes with several sensible proposals for reducing disorder at the school level and for enhancing the authority of educators.

School of Dreams: Making the Grade at a Top American High School, by Edward Humes (Harcourt). What makes Whitney High School so special? Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Edward Humes immersed himself in the life of this renowned magnet school in Cerritos, California, to find out. The school is not notable for having extra money or a first-class facility; it is housed in a no-frills building, and its per-pupil spending is the lowest in the district. Nor is it distinguished by the quality of its teaching staff, which Humes describes as “at best uneven.”

Visionary leadership clearly plays a role in fostering an expectation that all Whitney graduates will attend college—many of them at elite universities. Strangely, however, Humes places less emphasis on the fact that the school accepts only the district’s strongest students, who must maintain a C average or return to their neighborhood schools.

Humes’ account is engaging, but beware of journalists peddling policy advice based on the experiences of one highly atypical school and a tendentious reading of the research on test-based accountability.

No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practices of School Accountability, edited by Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West (Brookings). The extensive accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have provoked much cheering and hand-wringing, but not much reasoned analysis. This edited collection, which pulls together a series of studies first presented at Harvard University, is a welcome contribution to the conversation about NCLB. The studies focus on the national politics of accountability; state, local, and international evidence regarding the effects of high-stakes accountability; and topics such as charter school performance and the consequences of disaggregating data by students’ race and ethnicity. The overall thesis is that political pressures are likely to soften the harsher edges of NCLB, but that even temperate accountability is likely to be beneficial.