
Before the advent of recorded sound, most homes could enjoy music only if a family member played an instrument. Skill at the piano, violin, or mandolin was thus a decided asset in the mating game. Even men were expected at least to be able to sing along. But amateur musicians can hardly compete with CDs and boom boxes, to say nothing of the media-plexes at the center of the modern household. More may have been lost than simply our common capacity to salute the flag with the “Star-Spangled Banner,” say the authors of this well-written case for music education. Perret and Fox have used music to reach young, disadvantaged children and argue that learning to play an instrument is so demanding a task that it stretches the brain, producing connections that pay off in reading, math, and general cognitive skill. In his introduction to the book, neurologist Frank Wood points out that more experimentation is needed to know whether the promise of music is as great as some early studies have suggested. In the meantime, this lay-friendly book should inspire many a parent to find space in the living room for at least an upright piano—together with a Thompson exercise book for the little ones.


Teacher unions, many Democrats, and some school boards have attacked No Child Left Behind (NCLB) from its inception in 2002. But now, the Koret Task Force (which serves as the editorial board for this journal, full disclosure requires us to say), long recognized for its commitment to the NCLB principles of accountability, transparency, and choice, has issued its own critique of the ambitious law. The Task Force members conclude that the measuring stick created by the law is faulty, that state standards vary in problematic ways, and that the law fosters school choice in name, but not in fact. The Koret Task Force endorses the law’s aims and insists that the law requires amendment rather than eradication, but this volume provides plenty of evidence that it is not only apologists and union leaders who think NCLB requires some repairs.


Wolf and Macedo have pulled together a rich, thoughtful collection of essays examining choice-based schooling in North America and Europe. The editors set out to see how other nations reconcile concerns about civic values and social cohesion in a context of school choice, and the knowledgable authors gathered in this volume respond with articles on the evolution and workings of school choice arrangements in Canada, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and England, among others. They provide a clear, useful analysis of how choice works abroad, how the state regulates schooling, and how different nations have addressed concerns about social fragmentation and threats to democratic values. The accounts document a wide variety of arrangements and suggest a tendency for government regulation to make publicly supported private schools look more and more like state-run schools. They find no evidence anywhere that publicly funded choice has had dire consequences. The closing analyses, by veteran American researchers like John Witte, Charles Glenn, and William Galston, highlight the manner in which program design plays a critical role in determining how choice-based reform affects shared public values.

Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis, edited by Gary Orfield (Harvard Education Press).

As every teenager knows, the American high school is broken. Many vote with their feet, leaving the school before graduation day, despite the urgings of adults who believe that mere seat-sitting inside a classroom will yield benefits years later. Useful essays in this collection document both the extent of our high school problem and its concentration at the heart of our metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, other essayists endorse what might be called the incarceration theory of education:
mere confinement inside the school door is enough to make something good happen. On these grounds, they criticize attempts to ensure that students are learning, for fear that accountability schemes will induce higher dropout rates. Altogether, the collection, while valuable, is unbalanced. Missing is the work of such scholars as the Manhattan Institute’s Jay Greene, who both brought the issue to the attention of educators and has shown that the dropout problem was well entrenched long before accountability came along.


The editors mount a progressive challenge to the “Old-guard Leftist” defense of the public school monopoly and embrace “a radical rethinking and restructuring of public education.” In doing so, they seek to upend the established politics of choice-based reform. Rofes and Stulberg charge liberals with putting the interests of teacher unions and other political allies ahead of those of the children and the disadvantaged. They conclude that charter schooling may be the most promising strategy to protect vulnerable populations. The book’s nine chapters are somewhat less stimulating than the editors’ thesis, as they feature academic jargon and multicultural platitudes, with titles like “School Choice through a Foucauldian Lens” and “Culture, Language, and Self-Determination.” While choice proponents always welcome new allies, especially those who can help frame choice-based reform as a fight for social justice, let there be no mistake that the editors (and many of the chapter authors) are hostile toward for-profit providers, skeptical about the virtues of competition, unabashed champions of more school spending, and eager to wed education reform to a larger agenda of redistribution and regulation. What any of this implies for the evolving politics of school choice is yet to be seen.


The premise of this book is that states need to move beyond trying to fix their broken, Industrial Age school systems and focus their reform efforts instead on creating “new schools”—charter schools, contracted schools, site-managed schools. That’s easier, says Kolderie, one of America’s foremost charter school pioneers, than scrapping away the layers of entrenched special interests from the current system. All children don’t learn the same way, he says, so we need schools that actually align with their individual learning styles. To do this, states need to provide real incentives for districts to change, and districts need to stop thinking of themselves as owners and operators of schools and start thinking of themselves as the “education board” overseeing a portfolio of individually operated schools. Kolderie imagines a future free of bureaucratic red tape, micromanaging outsiders, and indiscriminate demands. What he doesn’t say is how to get the establishment to step out of the way.

Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools? by Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian (Heineman).

The authors of this tirade believe that accountability in education is nothing more than a ploy by “business interests” to exploit children for profit. In recent years Ohanian has become a national star of the antitesting crusade, and this book showcases her belief that both business and conservatives are using education standards to root out “pockets of freedom and creativity” in education to produce a compliant, docile workforce. This book offers a useful window into the worldview of the anti-accountability extremists. The authors name many names of the evil pro-testing cabal. The villainous line-up includes Kati Haycock and the Education Trust, the Broad Foundation, the Business Roundtable, the Public School Forum, New American Schools, former U.S. secretary of education Rod Paige, and IBM. Ohanian and Emery urge teachers and parents to contest accountability efforts by turning to political action, lawsuits, and civil disobedience. Ultimately, what’s disheartening is the authors’ eagerness to ignore the troubled performance of too many schools and their passion for vilifying those who have set out to do something about it.