
This ambitious, probing, and often insightful 16-chapter volume unexpectedly turned into a retrospective appraisal of Alan Bersin’s seven years as superintendent of the San Diego City Schools. A highly successful litigator and U.S. attorney, Bersin was recruited by the San Diego school board in 1998 to turn around its big, troubled school system. He brought in former New York City schools chancellor Anthony Alvarado to help and they embarked on a complex, far-reaching strategy. So serious was Bersin about his multifaceted reform plan, known as the “Blueprint for Student Success,” that he sought out the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick Hess to appraise the plan’s progress. No doubt the hard-charging superintendent saw the Hess project as a “formative” evaluation that would help him make midcourse corrections. But just a few months after the conference at which the chapters of this volume were aired in draft form, a new school board grew hesitant about Bersin’s tough medicine, especially for schools flagged as persistent low-performers. They swiftly signaled to Bersin that his services would no longer be needed. This volume, then, is something of a eulogy; but it is hard to think of a single other large urban school system that has a full measure of any of the three.


The traditional American school board is under attack from above (by state and federal regulations), from the sides (by judicial mandates and assertions of mayoral control), and from below (by demands for increased school choice). If not necessarily on the way out, school boards are plainly under siege. Some say, “good riddance,” dismissing school boards as yet another mechanism by which teacher unions and other organized interest groups exert undue influence over the nation’s schools. Defenders of school boards, however, see them as responsive, accountable bodies through which local communities can still deliberate how best to educate their children. On balance, the evidence compiled in this edited volume favors the critics. Most notably, none of the volume’s authors believes that school boards are a source of meaningful policy innovation. Those who are convinced that our schools require fundamental reform, Howell aptly concludes, had best look beyond the boardroom.

The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education, by Kenneth J. Saltman (Routledge).

In this fantastical little volume, author Kenneth Saltman rants at the Edison Schools for an array of sins and so seeks to join the ranks of the antichoice, antiaccountability crowd (like Alfie Kohn, Susan Ohanian, Henry Giroux, and Jonathan Kozol) and, presumably, will share some of the lucre from the apologista dinner circuit. Dr. Saltman, an assistant professor of social and cultural studies in education at DePaul University, believes, as he says in his introduction, that the Edison model dictates “standardizing learning and pledging allegiance to the corporation.” He ridicules concerns about education costs and performance as a “corporate” agenda item and attacks education “privatizers” for relying on “racist and sexist assumptions, stereotypes, metaphors, and representations to further their goals of bashing public schools.” There’s much more in this vein. Reformers may want to read the book just to remind themselves that there really is a cottage industry of thinkers who believe that ideas like “competition,” “choice,” and “efficiency” are mortal threats to our kids and our way of life.


Authors Luce, chairman of the National Center for Educational Accountability and founder of Just for Kids, and Thompson, deputy director of the Texas-based O’Donnell Foundation, subscribe to the “nothing fancy” school of education reform. This succinct book sketches the benefits of accountability, data, time on task, and relentless attention to student achievement. Particularly worthwhile is the chapter on replicating success, in which they offer a detailed
and user-friendly explanation of how policymakers and practitioners can pinpoint and then emulate high performers. On high-school reform, they call for creating “lead teachers,” intensive content training for teachers, extra time on task for students, financial incentives for teachers, and professional management. While a few of their ideas are radical—like the suggestion that students be financially rewarded for academic success—the emphasis is on explaining how to design and implement accountability and data systems that work. This is a book that reformers, parents, and state and district officials just might regard as a valuable desktop reference in the No Child Left Behind era.


The Oxford University Press and the Annenberg Public Policy Center have teamed up to produce an ambitious series of longish books about major institutions of American democracy. This 14-chapter, 388-page volume seeks to encompass public education in the United States, but in no way does it provide a general introduction to that sprawling topic. The reader will not, for example, learn much about curriculum issues, testing, or accountability, much less about school facilities, transportation, guidance counseling, or extracurricular activities. Most of the chapters address civic education and “education for citizenship,” restating familiar pieties about “common schooling” and the threats to it. Most of the authors are also familiar names from the world of education-school policy debates. Welcome exceptions are William Galston, who does a nice job with the political wellsprings of contemporary education-policy differences, and attorney Paul Dimond, who shows how school choice advances the “democratic ideal of free common schools.”