
In the controversial 2003 Grutter v. Bollinger decision, finding for the constitutionality of race-conscious college admissions policies, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor declared that increasing the number of minority students with high grades and test scores meant, “We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary.” Her pronouncement threw a hot potato into the lap of America’s K–12 schools.

In Generational Change, editor Paul Peterson (who also edits this journal) and a stellar lineup of scholars examine the causes of the racial achievement gap and ponder what it will take to close it. In his provocative introduction, Peterson critiques the cultural changes of the past 15 years, setting the tone for this volume. Shrugging aside pieties about desegregation, preschool, and the notion that schools serving black children are struggling against insuperable odds, authors such as Roland Fryer, Steven Levitt, David Armor, Ronald Haskins, and Derek Neal describe the limited value of favored remedies and provide concrete alternatives to the status quo. This careful volume provides a roadmap for policymakers and educators who are serious about responding to O’Connor’s charge.

Divided by God: America’s Church-State Problem—And What We Should Do About It. Noah Feldman (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux).

Back from an overseas stint helping draft a new Iraqi constitution, Noah Feldman, a prolific NYU law professor, offers new advice on interpreting our own Constitution. He worries that Americans, including those on the Supreme Court, are increasingly divided on the proper relationship between religion and government. To minimize tensions, he would have us allow more room for religious symbols in public debate while banning public funds for religious institutions and activities, including vouchers for religious schools.

Feldman’s compromise points in the opposite direction from recent Supreme Court precedent, and he argues for it mainly on historical grounds. He shows that many of the framers believed all tax-funded support for religious institutions violated citizens’ liberty of conscience. Meanwhile, the ugly 19th-century debates over the funding of Catholic schools, in his view, reveal the drawbacks of letting the government determine which religious institutions should receive public support.

True enough, but Feldman fails to cast as critical an eye on the alternative, which is to force all those who can’t afford a private education into public schools, where ongoing conflicts over the teaching of evolution, school prayer, and other religion-infused issues have done little to foster religious harmony.

School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity. Alex Molnar (Routledge).

Ardent market skeptic Alex Molnar lambastes firms like Pizza Hut and Papa John’s for providing rewards to students who meet their reading goals or earn passing grades. On the one hand, this is a semihysterical volume with chapter titles like “Eat, Drink, and Be Diabetic: Using Schools to Promote Illness”. On the other hand, Molnar’s effort provides plenty of data, and that part of the book is more useful than the conspiracy-mongering. Many readers from across the ideological spectrum will sympathize with Molnar’s concern that “commercialism has transformed American childhood and the institutions that serve children.” More troubling is his suggestion that for-profit tutors, virtual schooling, and education-management organizations are destructive forces that are no different from efforts to expand school-based marketing. Ultimately, Molnar doesn’t propose any solutions that are not condemnations of “corporations” and “privatization”—nor is it clear that he really believes that troubled schools can be “democratizing civic institutions” if only we can roll back contemporary commercialism.

Schooling America: How the Public Schools Meet the Nation’s Changing Needs. Patricia Albjerg Graham (Oxford).

Education historian Patricia Albjerg Graham has penned a sweeping, readable history of American schooling in the 20th century. She argues that schooling has shifted over the decades from an emphasis on “assimilation” in the early 1900s; to a focus on access in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; to an embrace of achievement in the most recent era. Schooling America also traces the evolution of a chaotic, autonomous system of higher education to one marked increasingly by a commitment to accountability and the ideal of the research university.
This is a volume marked by personal touches. In a chapter beginning in 1900, the author gives us a description of her father’s first day of school. But Graham also pays much attention to individual reformers and decisionmakers. The book is more notable for its scholarship than for the author’s cautious conclusions, such as her observation that report cards for elementary, secondary, and higher education may not be worthwhile. Her only clear programmatic recommendation is that the nation needs to invest more in education research. Graham’s book may not do much to illuminate the future, but it provides a cogent look at how we got to the present.


Hess, of the American Enterprise Institute (and Education Next), has compiled a rewarding set of 20 essays (several of them coauthored) addressing four urgent education issues—leadership and public education; competition and accountability; the politics of school reform; teachers and principals—and a miscellaneous category that he terms “the road ahead.” His extensive introduction includes an uncommonly candid (and germane) personal history that traces the evolution of his thinking on these challenges. Although such collections are invariably uneven, and some entries sit awkwardly alongside others written at different times for different audiences, Hess is a stimulating thinker whose intellectual hegira and policy evolution are worth watching. He’s also a lucid and prolific writer. Particularly worthy here are his insights on “what’s public about public education,” his review of both the promise and the limits of school choice, and his formulation of a tough-love strategy for reforming institutions that are constitutionally averse to change.

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