
Silver bullets come not here. In this slender, readable volume, veteran educators Jane David (now head of the Bay Area Research Group) and Larry Cuban (emeritus education professor at Stanford) conduct a breakneck tour of almost—but not quite—every prominent education-reform idea of the past decade or two and say what they like and dislike about each. Clustered in three parts (“reforming the system,” “reforming how schools are organized,” “reforming teaching and learning”), some 20 reforms are on their itinerary. They neither fully embrace nor entirely dismiss any of them. The devil, as always, lurks in the details, and K–12 education is sufficiently complex that thoroughly reworking it calls for numerous complementary and more or less concurrent actions. Notwithstanding the promise of the book’s subtitle, the authors view these reform options through the eyes of practitioners—teachers and principals, mostly—rather than those of taxpayers, policymakers, or parents. Fittingly, they also treat more kindly the change strategies that try to strengthen practitioners than they treat those that seek to alter the ground rules or power relationships of the system itself. They are cautious incrementalists, not bomb throwers or bold innovators. But they’ve written a useful reform primer, which seems to have been the point.

What If All the Kids Are White? Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families. Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia G. Ramsey (Teachers College Press).

Many Education Next readers have long wrestled with that burning educational query: “How does one promote multicultural education if all the students in a school are white?” Now, into the breach step Louise Derman-Sparks, a faculty member at Pacific Oaks College, and Patricia Ramsey, director of a child study center at Mount Holyoke College. In the introduction, the authors bravely explain that “whites often fear that they will have much to lose if racism ends,” but posit that whites actually “have much to gain” if they become advocates for social justice and “anti-bias/multicultural” education. The book itself is a treatise on how educators can and should promote “anti-bias” education. Chapters include “A Short History of White Racism in the United States,” “How Children Construct White Identities,” and “Fostering Children’s Caring and Activism.” Helpful tips on “anti-bias/multicultural” teaching include bringing in speakers from other ethnic groups, taking purposive field trips, and discussing skin color and the biases of staff members. The book also includes “don’t-miss” appendices like a table of “Selected White Anti-Racism Activists” and the learning exercise “What Do Trees Have to Do with Peace?” And all of this from a flagship educational press, no less.

School Money Trials: The Legal Pursuit of Educational Adequacy. Martin R. West and Paul E. Peterson, editors (Brookings Institution Press).

While high-profile reforms like No Child Left Behind and charter schools get most of the attention from scholars and the media, an alternative reform strategy has become the true 10,000-pound gorilla: the adequacy lawsuit (see “Courtroom Alchemy, ” features, p. 20, and “Judging Money,” research, p. 68). In this crisp volume, Education Next editors West and Peterson have pulled together 13 compelling chapters examining the adequate-funding movement, its (evolving) legal theories, its (flimsy) evidentiary base, its (mixed) classroom impact, and its (uncertain) future. You’ll finish the book wondering why the topic hasn’t received proper attention before; after all, lawsuits have been filed in at least 39 states to date, with victories for the plaintiffs in 25. All-star contributors include school finance guru Eric Hanushek, teacher salary myth-slayer Michael Podgursky, and constitutional scholar Kenneth Starr. One of the strongest articles is from...
Robert Costrell, who helped to defeat an adequacy lawsuit while serving as an advisor in the Massachusetts governor’s office. The Bay State’s secret? Its aggressive school reforms are boosting student achievement, demonstrating to the courts that its funding is plenty adequate, thank you very much. Still, do we really want the judiciary making these sorts of judgments? If there’s a backlash coming, this book might serve as its guiding star.


Reforming Education in Florida: Recommendations from the Koret Task Force. Paul E. Peterson, editor (Hoover Institution Press).

The prolific Koret Task Force on K–12 Education at the Hoover Institution is at it again. Hot on the heels of Charter Schools against the Odds, edited by Paul Hill, to which readers were alerted in the last issue of Education Next, come two new books, one (Courting Failure) published as the first in a series of Education Next Books. (Members of the Koret Task Force serve on the editorial board of Education Next.)

Courting Failure includes nine chapters that present “data points” on school finance lawsuits—demonstrating that court rulings show little relationship to the provisions of state constitutions, that plaintiffs are unable to link resource shortfalls to achievement differences, that enormous infusions of resources don’t achieve their purpose, and so on. The volume concludes with a policy statement from the Koret Task Force: attaining the education outcomes we want “will take more fundamental changes than simply throwing more resources at the problem,” changes like a strong accountability system, incentives aligned with performance, and transparency in the operations and activities of schools.

In Reforming Education in Florida, members of the Koret Task Force put Florida’s education policy under a microscope. Invited by Florida governor Jeb Bush to scrutinize the state’s practices and recommend future initiatives, the authors look at many education reform policies introduced in the last eight years in the Sunshine State, including the state’s accountability plan, its value-added data warehouse (which tracks individual student progress and allows the state to evaluate schools based on the amount of individual student growth they produce), its alternative teacher certification and performance pay programs, its numerous school-choice proposals, and voter-initiated efforts like the state’s voluntary universal pre-K program and class-size reduction initiative. The chapters are accompanied by concrete recommendations to help Florida extend its gains.


The sensible use of online and distance education is at the vanguard of today’s efforts to rethink educational provision. Harvard professor Chris Dede has collected an important set of analyses to consider how online learning is being used to improve teacher quality. As Dede notes in his introduction, it is widely understood that today’s professional-development programs are frequently mediocre, fragmented, and superficial. The promise of online professional development is that, if properly designed, it can provide cost-effective, tailored, “just-in-time” training. The challenge is making it work, a task that has suffered due to a lack of careful consideration of existing efforts. This volume examines ten diverse models, providing a comparative look at what’s working and how these various efforts are designed. Chapters survey the existing research, what some of the leading providers look like, how online mentoring is being used, and what challenges exist. The volume doesn’t probe as deeply into the evidence or into specific efforts as might be ideal, and some chapters are hobbled by clunky language, but the volume is a useful and important contribution. Dede and his colleagues close with some practical guidance for researchers and policymakers; the bottom line is that more research, experimentation, and bold thinking are essential in this realm.
Who knows your heritage?
Who knows the issues that count?
Who speaks to YOU?

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