
Payne, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, here sets out to explain “the sociology of failure” of urban reform. Drawing primarily on his experiences in Chicago, Payne considers the effects of social context, poverty, race, bureaucracy, and organizational dynamics, and uses them to raise hard questions for both progressive and conservative reformers. Arguing “there is just no doubt that one of the central problems in improving urban schools—arguably the central problem—is the problem of teacher resistance,” he critiques the progressive expectation that teachers can eventually be coaxed along through evidence on two key counts: first, it presumes that reformers and teachers share the same aims and metrics, and second, it presumes that reformers can marshal the evidence to convince the holdouts. Payne deems both assumptions wrongheaded. He is equally caustic when it comes to those who pursue change via accountability, incentives, and choice, faulting their failure to pay sufficient heed to the importance of local culture, social capital, and trust in making change real. Challenging simple verities of all stripes, Payne has delivered a volume well worth a closer look.


The price for having former public officials advocating for school reform is that we must every so often be subjected to a book like this one. In it, former West Virginia governor, former Congressman, and current president of the Alliance for Excellent Education Bob Wise piles up the platitudes and rings up the cash register. After serving up the familiar justifications for high school reform (e.g., social costs, changing demographics, dropout factories), Wise sets forth a threadbare list of the 10 elements of a successful high school (rigorous curricula, skilled teachers, community involvement, and so forth). He then launches into his litany of “more.” He wants the feds to provide funds for adolescent literacy programs and state data systems; to ensure that every school is staffed by “skilled” teachers and principals; for district efforts to “personalize the educational experience”; and much more; and he calls on Congress to establish “meaningful high school accountability” (though the details are vague). Given the amorphous prescriptions and the absence of price tags, it’s not clear whether Wise wants Congress to pony up 50 bucks or another $50 billion—only that he wants more. Talk about singing the same old song.


The idea that educators can learn from the business or nonprofit worlds used to be controversial. No longer. This textbook for aspiring superintendents and other district-level leaders, edited by two professors from Harvard’s business school and two from its education school, rests on the premise that effective management practices are similar no matter what the sector. It offers 19 “cases” from corporations, agencies, and school districts that embody coherent, high-performing organizations. These cases are organized into “modules” on five themes: making coherence concrete; finding and supporting personnel; building a high-performing organization; managing schools across differences; and sustaining high performance over time. Many examples will be familiar to readers of the “best practices” literature (Southwest Airlines, New York City Police Department, Long Beach Unified School District), but the book’s nearly 500 pages allow its editors to delve into details that will be fresh for most. This volume deserves to play a key role in education leadership programs nationwide, but even its heft won’t teach superintendents everything they need to know. Leading a big school system is as much
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about politics as management; maybe the next set of cases should be written in collaboration with Harvard’s political science department.

The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don’t Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—and What We Can Do About It. Tony Wagner (Basic Books). The Harvard Ed School’s Tony Wagner has written a thoughtful half-right book—and it’s safe to predict that the other half will get the most attention. He contends, correctly, that something more than basic skills and factual knowledge needs to be inculcated by our schools and colleges if young Americans are to do their part to keep us competitive in tomorrow’s flattening, shrinking world. He adumbrates seven “survival skills” (e.g., “critical thinking and problem solving,” “agility and adaptability”) that he believes must become education priorities. So far so good—if fundamentally familiar. And he identifies a few schools (High Tech High, for instance, Ted Sizer’s Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, and Dennis Litky’s The Met) that in his opinion do a good job in these ways. Then—the book’s wrong half—in language that will get him lionized at school-establishment conferences (and, perhaps, speaking fees to rival Jonathan Kozol’s), he takes out after testing and standards and government programs like No Child Left Behind that emphasize such things. He deprecates knowledge. He deplores results-based accountability for schools, educators, and kids. It’s no wonder this book’s “blurbers” include Howard Gardner and Deborah Meier. It’s a paean to educational progressivism dressed up as a guide to economic competitiveness.

School Choice International: Exploring Public-Private Partnerships. Rajashri Chakrabarti and Paul E. Peterson, eds. (MIT Press). As the subtitle of this book suggests, the papers in this scholarly volume are less about the act of choosing a school than about the ways the private sector has worked in partnership with public education systems to enlarge and enliven the landscape of schools that can be chosen. A variety of public-private partnerships around the globe are illuminated here: vouchers and charter schools in the U.S., of course, but also publicly funded vouchers in Colombia and Chile, city academies with private sector sponsors in the U.K., fee-charging schools serving the rural poor in India, concession schools in Colombia (where the management of some public schools is turned over to high-quality private schools), government contracting with private schools to enroll students in areas where spots in public schools are scarce in the Côte d’Ivoire and the Philippines, and more. A number of initiatives are described in detail in these papers—written for a conference cosponsored by Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance and the World Bank. Some initiatives are the subject of rigorous evaluations here, but more interesting than the case studies are the big-picture observations and arguments about the blending of public and private. One chapter, by Ludger Woessmann (coauthor of “School Choice International,” research, page 54) uses international data to show that systems that make greater use of public-private partnerships (ideally combining public funding with private operation) perform better than systems that do not. As other chapters illustrate, not only are public-private partnerships widespread and diverse, but the lines between public and private can be fuzzy and shifting. Thomas Netchyba argues in one paper that in the United States there is no such thing as a true public school, since access to public schools is rationed through private housing markets, and it is unlikely that there will ever be a fully private school, since private schools are subject to government oversight, and support for private schools is conditional on certain public aims being met. An antidote to the view that there are two kinds of schools, public and private, this volume suggests that a larger role for the private sector in public education is more inevitable than radical.