The Seduction of Common Sense: How the Right Has Framed the Debate on America's Schools. Kevin K. Kumashiro (Teachers College Press). This is a book that does not live up to its provocative title. For sure, some of the author's analysis rings true: K–12 education reformers sometimes try to scare the public and policymakers into action (think “A Nation at Risk”), and the Right may use the language of a “strict father” when arguing for testing, standards, and sanctions for failing schools. But Kumashiro comes from such a Far Left perspective (the book is part of a series edited by none other than bomber turned ed school professor William Ayers) that the thrust of his arguments is easily marginalized. In the author’s conspiracy-laden world, the Right works to “maintain the status quo, particularly its hierarchies and privileges” and to “undermine public education.” Vouchers, charter schools, testing, alternative certification, and other now-mainstream reforms are part of this broad effort to eliminate the public schools and oppress poor people. This puts Kumashiro into a bit of a bind, as he is forced to admit that there are some on the Left who support these ideas, too. Only those on the Right, however, support these positions for nefarious reasons. The author ties himself in similar knots when it comes to efforts to close the achievement gap, which he sees as “a strategic move by the Right,” as it “masks the other ways that oppression plays out in schools,” such as “the structural racism that is exemplified in the historical, economic, and curricular causes of inferior education for students of color.” Readers will learn a little bit about “the Right” by reading this book, but much, much more about the loopy Left.

Real Leaders, Real Schools: Stories of Success Against Enormous Odds. Gerald C. Leader with Amy F. Stern (Harvard Education Press). The great frustration of books about heroic principals “succeeding against enormous odds,” five of whom are vividly and admiringly profiled here, is that the U.S. has constructed a public education system in which a strong school leader with a successful school is the exception rather than the rule. There’s no shortage of such books and every reason to welcome another one in this genre (penned by an emeritus Boston University professor fittingly named Leader, who runs his own Leadership Institute). But there’s a woeful shortage of such principals and schools. The subjects of this volume are five former principals in the Boston Public Schools over the past two decades.

The “odds” despite which they succeeded are familiar in large urban districts: changing pupil demographics, set-in-their-ways teachers ill prepared for these unfamiliar students, leadership vacuums, tight budgets, rigid bureaucracies, unhelpful parents, inadequate data systems, new standards, external accountability testing, and so on. Despite all that, these men and women started smart, built teams, used data, “leveraged” the state testing program, selected their own staff, engaged parents, and more. Leader’s concluding chapter, distilling 10 lessons from their examples, is insightful enough but frustrating just the same, because the lessons seem as obvious as they are helpful. Why do we build education systems in which adroit school leaders are rarities?

Mobilizing the Community to Help Students Succeed. Hugh B. Price (ASCD). Hugh Price, former head of the National Urban League, licensed attorney, and former editorial writer for the New York Times, begins by recalling that he thought it the mission of the Urban League to “galvanize communities to create a pervasive culture of achievement that celebrates and, yes, provides protective cover to achievers [and] that neutralizes negative peer pressures.” That same no-illusions practicality runs through the whole of this little gem of a volume. Leaving grand designs aside, Price has penned a smart book about what teachers, schools, and communities can and
should do to help disadvantaged students succeed. He shares lessons learned by the military, advice that General Colin Powell once gave him regarding the importance of rites of passage, and insights from the Urban League’s Achievement Month initiatives. Price shares straightforward guidance on how schools can employ recognition and rituals and on what community groups should do. Refreshing is Price’s blunt expectation that children can and will take responsibility for their actions, but only if responsible adults “bestir themselves to inspire them.”

**School Accountability, Autonomy, and Choice Around the World.** Ludger Woessmann, Elke Ludemann, Gabriela Schutz, and Martin R. West (Edward Elgar).

Education reforms based on accountability, autonomy, or choice became popular long before there was much hard evidence that they actually lead to better student performance. This book—short, dense, and likely to be particularly prized by those who love tables full of statistics, though the prose is very clear—is an important contribution to the growing collection of high-quality studies finding that greater accountability, autonomy, and choice do, indeed, make for a better education system and greater student learning. The book also showcases an approach to learning from international evidence very different from simply sending researchers to Finland to observe Finnish math teachers in their classrooms. The research in the volume is based on data from the PISA 2003 international student achievement test taken by students in 37 countries. The authors—economists and a political scientist from the U.S. and Germany—have created a framework that controls for the effects of a large set of student, family, school, and country characteristics. They find that not only do greater accountability, autonomy, and choice (in various configurations) in a country’s school system boost student achievement, they also boost noncognitive skills and increase equity (breaking the link between student achievement and socioeconomic status). Students perform better in countries with more choice and competition and in schools with both hiring autonomy and external exit exams. Incentives work around the globe, it turns out.


This wide-ranging collection asks what it will take for educational entrepreneurship to foster broad improvement in American schooling. Editor Frederick Hess’s introduction divides school reformers into two broad camps, finding each wanting. Capacity builders trust troubled school districts to reform themselves from within, not noticing that it is typically new organizations that in other sectors generate breakthrough improvements. Choice-based reformers, in contrast, look outside of districts for solutions but have failed to see that “markets characterized by insufficient quality-control mechanisms, a lack of transparency, a scarcity of human or investment capital, and harmful regulatory and institutional barriers are more likely to produce mediocrity than effective solutions.” The essays that follow survey nascent “supply side” strategies to boost human capital, attract investment, control quality, improve research and development, and remove the political barriers that too often hinder the growth of new providers of educational services. Told their efforts have not been sufficient to transform the quality of American schooling, choice-based reformers may complain that Hess does not assign them due credit for advocating necessary changes. But they would do well to heed his call to ensure that greater competition in education in fact leads to more innovation and ultimately to improved quality.