book review

The Education Reform Book Is Dead

Long live education reform

By Jay P. Greene

For this 10th anniversary issue, Education Next asked me to highlight the education reform books, released over the past decade, that define currently dominant education-reform strategies. For any previous decade, this would be relatively easy to do. But picking a recent education-reform book that epitomizes current reform thinking is nearly impossible. The problem is not that there are too many highly influential books to choose from. Nor is it too soon to have the proper perspective. The problem is that education reform thinking is being shaped less and less by books. As we are seeing in other policy areas, blogs, articles, and other new media are displacing books as the primary means by which intellectual policy movements are formed and sustained.

revival of progressive education, with open classrooms, student-centered learning, and whole language, which was all the rage in the 1970s, could be found in a few influential books of that time. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s Teaching as a Subversive Activity and Charles Silberman’s Crisis in the Classroom come to mind. If we were talking about the 1980s and the growth of the standards and accountability movement, we could credit E. D. Hirsch’s Cultural Literacy. And the case for school choice was laid out in the 1990s by John Chubb and Terry Moe’s Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools.

The first decade of the 21st century has also had a dominant strategy: incentive-based reforms, such as increasing competition among charter and district schools, merit-pay plans to improve teacher quality, and school-level accountability based on testing. But no single book or set of books stands out as the voice of these reforms.

Rather than articulating a broad, theoretical case for reforms that have been embraced by policymakers, the books of the “aughts” were more likely to engage in debates over evidence, articulate a strategy that had not been adopted, or do battle against the strategies that policymakers did adopt. (See educationnext.org/ed-next-poll-top-books-of-the-decade/ for the results of a web poll that invited readers to vote for their favorite education books.)

My own book, Education Myths, may have bolstered efforts to enact the incentive-based reforms that dominated the decade, but it did not provide the conceptual rationale for the movement. William Howell and Paul Peterson’s Education Gap was more a review of the evidence from voucher experiments than it was a call

If we were talking about the 1960s, I could easily offer Jonathan Kozol’s Death at an Early Age as the articulation of that era’s strategy of increasing resources devoted to education, particularly for minority students. The charter and district schools, merit-pay plans to improve teacher quality, and school-level accountability based on testing. But no single book or set of books stands out as the voice of these reforms.

to arms for incentive-based reforms. Eric Hanushek and Alfred Lindseth’s Schoolhouses, Courthouses, and Statehouses and Frederick Hess’s Common Sense School Reform both make a case for incentive-based reforms, but they
are also primarily reviews of the current research rather than the articulation of a new reform strategy.

Some books from the aughts did make theoretical arguments for new reforms, but those reforms have not been embraced by policymakers, at least not yet. Terry Moe and John Chubb’s Liberating Learning, Paul Peterson’s Saving Schools, and Clayton Christensen et al.’s Disrupting Class all make the case for technology-based schools that substitute computers for human instruction. Someday that may be the dominant education-reform strategy, but that day is not today.

The most common type of education reform book from the period argued against the dominant strategies. Diane Ravitch’s The Death and Life of the Great American School System, Linda Darling-Hammond’s The Flat World and Education, Richard Rothstein’s Class and Schools, Daniel Koretz’s Measuring Up, Tony Wagner’s The Global Achievement Gap, and Deborah Meier’s In Schools We Trust, among many others, are notable for their opposition to incentive-based reforms. There have always been books opposing reforms embraced by the Establishment, but they were usually outliers. In the aughts, however, a large number of prominent books stood in opposition.

Why is it so difficult to identify a book that embodies the incentive-based reforms of the decade and relatively easy to list books that argue against them? One reason is that books have lost their place as primary vehicles for shaping education policy. Just like in other realms, books are being displaced by other media.

A film like Waiting for “Superman” can have considerably more influence over education policy than any book. Articles and reports can be released on the Internet as soon as they are written. Even blogs are swaying education policy discussions to a greater extent than books. The power of blogs is especially clear when it comes to debating the merits of the research on various policy questions. There is little point in writing a book that reviews and adjudicates research findings when online articles and blog posts can do the same thing and be available within days or even hours.

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The lack of policy influence that is attributable to recent education-reform books is not for lack of sales. Some have even become national best
sellers. The problem is that policymakers and other elites are less likely to be among their readers. Instead, the buyers increasingly seem to be those actively participating in education reform debates; the people actually shaping policy appear to be paying relatively little attention.

For example, teachers and others hostile to incentive-based reforms consume works by Diane Ravitch, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Tony Wagner to affirm their worldview. These books are not setting the agenda for policymakers. They are feeding the resentment of practitioners to an education reform agenda that draws its inspiration from nonbook sources and is advancing despite the hostility stirred by such books. These best-selling volumes are, in the words of their intellectual nemesis, “standing athwart history, yelling stop.”

But books are no longer up to the task of significantly altering, let alone stopping, education policy trends. Policy agendas are being shaped by online debates, articles, conferences, and documentary films—not by books. In policy terms, the education reform book is dead, even as education reform thrives.

There is hope. To paraphrase Miracle Max, the education reform book is only mostly dead. Its policy influence can be revived if authors steer clear of topics that are better addressed by other media. Blogs can evaluate research as it comes out and are quicker and cheaper to write as well as to read. Emotionally charged anecdotes can be shared to far greater effect in a documentary film. Books shouldn’t try to do what other media can do better, faster, and with greater ease.

Moreover, if book authors seek policy influence, they have to write with policy elites as their target audience. It may sell a lot of books to write for teachers or education-school students, but those people no longer dominate policymaking discussions. There is a new set of elites interested in education policy who do not come from the traditional teaching or education school worlds. These people tend to be young and technology savvy, getting more of their information from the Internet than from books. They can still be reached by books, but the volume would have to be written with them in mind rather than the traditional educator audience.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with books that are not written with policy influence as their primary objective. The book geared for an academic audience or designed to encourage a partisan base will continue to have its place. But if there is a lesson from the last decade of education reform books for enhancing policy influence, it is that the education reform book is dead—or at least mostly dead.

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