Diagnosing Education Reform
A solid dose of history is the first step toward a cure

The Same Thing Over and Over: How School Reformers Get Stuck in Yesterday’s Ideas
By Frederick M. Hess
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As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Ask a dozen educators why public schools seem to be in perpetual crisis and why successive reforms so often fall short and they’ll answer with familiar reasons: not enough money, union contracts, teacher certification, too much testing, NCLB...

Education policy researcher Rick Hess doesn’t always disagree, but he adds to the list a circumstance that traverses them all: Education reform itself is in a pathological condition. His title underscores the irrationality of the enterprise, “the same thing over and over,” as do the book’s many epithets to describe its workings (“aimless charade,” “frenzied tinkering,” “unduly attached,” “talismanic significance,” “ossified mantras,” “ill-conceived fad”). Reformers hype the latest solution to low test scores and high dropout rates as a stunning breakthrough, the future of schooling. Slogans such as “education is the new civil right” sound forthright, but they bury practical policy discussions with tense personal and ideological commitments.

It is true that the education establishment often meets reform proposals with heated denunciation: “...the education reform movement in Massachusetts and the nation is part of a decades-long corporate and government attack on public education and on our children.” Vouchers are designed to destroy public schools and end education as a public institution.

Our primary concern is that voucher programs could end up resembling the ethnic cleansing now occurring in Kosovo.

Such excessive expressions signify a psycho-political state, one that resembles a neurotic person who agonizes over this behavior and that feeling but never burrows down to deeper causes and structures. Reforms address class size, school size, teacher “dispositions,” parental choice, alternative certification, and other features of the system, but the basic machinery remains in place. The debates can be ferocious, Hess writes, but “seen from an arm’s length removed, the diagnoses generally amount to a concession that everyone can more or less go on about their business, so long as we demand more, do more, and spend more.”

To go beyond tinkering, he insists, we need an attitude adjustment. Certain basics of education policy have hardened into inevitabilities—the brick-and-mortar building and uniform learning goals, for example—and to put them on the table for examination strikes many as radical, irresponsible, or just plain malevolent. People need to disinvest from this routine and that, and lower the volume of their opinions. More humility and less contentiousness, Hess advises, and more experimentation and less stiffness. Most of all, stop trying to solve everything. Look at how often reform has failed.

Indeed, the long-term perspective is the first step in the process, and so Hess devotes much of the book to setting current cruxes in the shadow of history. We argue over vocational vs. academic curricula, but the ancients did, too (Sophists vs. the Socrates). We complain about the costs of textbooks and ponder other methods of delivery; in the Middle Ages, students rented manuscripts directly from the authors! We consider summer vacation a fact of nature, but in the 1840s the school year in northeastern cities lasted more than 240 days. Some of Hess’s remembrances produce ironic results:

• Reformers pushed for smaller schools a few years back to improve instruction and deepen the curriculum, but 100 years ago reformers created large schools for precisely the same reasons.

• Reformers continue to develop new “dispositions” in teacher certification on grounds of diversity and multiculturism, but reformers devised dispositions long ago on grounds of emotional and physical vitality. The latter look ridiculous today, so what makes the former not potentially ridiculous a few years hence?

• Reformers aim to curtail school boards in order to make administration more efficient (or less dysfunctional in the case of some boards), but, as with school size, reformers created school boards 100 or so years ago for precisely the same reasons.

• Policymakers often defend public schools as more democratic and diverse than private schools, but in the past public schools served as a restrictive mode of socialization — for instance, when they were advocated as a bulwark against private Catholic schooling.

These cases advance because of forgetfulness, which in turn licenses a damaging form of certitude and conceit. People proceed without recognizing that “there are no permanent solutions
in schooling” and that ideas announced today have been announced before with equal fanfare. A little more background might temper their claims. “History humbles,” Hess declares.

More institutional memory will advance the debate, too, “emancipating” (a favorite term here) reform from unreasonable expectations, overdone claims of novelty, and us versus them groupings. With a sober awareness of past disappointments, we can bore down into existing structures and envision new, genuinely new, ways of education, “rethinking the structure of schooling.” One example is the School of One program in New York City in which the old model of one teacher handling 25 students at once in one classroom is broken up into a new model of each student being assigned each day to a large class, a tutor, a computer simulation, or a small group, whatever works best at that moment, until the student meets the learning objective. Another idea Hess floats is to break up the monopoly of school boards by nationalizing the services boards provide, so that an effective approach or policy could be imported from one state to another without going through the costly bureaucracy of the importer. Still another is to transfer the sites of teacher certification from universities to K–12 schools on a hands-on apprenticeship model.

Of course, the interests against such innovations are strong (where would all the ed school profs go?), and pathologies inevitably form defenses against the designs that would cure them. This past October, Hess wrote an op-ed in the New York Daily News on the end of Michelle Rhee’s three-year run as D.C. schools chancellor. Rhee and Mayor Adrian Fenty began with the rational expectation that “if they could deliver impressive academic results in the first couple of years, their critics would melt away.” Scores did rise significantly, but “the criticism and conflict only built.” At the end, only 30 percent of the African American community in D.C. supported Rhee.

As for Hess’s sober and sensible calls for muting the rhetoric of policy debates, it’s hard to feel much optimism. In the Fall 2010 issue of UCEA Review (available at the University Council for Educational Administration web site), former UCEA president and UNC-Chapel Hill professor Fenwick W. English has an essay titled “The 10 Most Wanted Enemies of American Public Education’s School Leadership.” Scroll down to the list at the end of the article and there he is at number 5: Frederick M. Hess.

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