

History Lessons from a Policy Insider

What should we be learning from past reform efforts?

Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform

By Jack Jennings

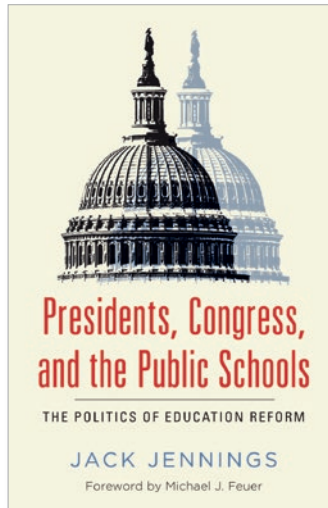
Harvard Education Press, 2015,
\$35; 264 pages.

As reviewed by Jay P. Greene

Education reformers tend to have little interest in history. They are so convinced that the old system is broken and so focused on fixing it for the future that they often fail to consider what lessons might be learned from past efforts. Jack Jennings's new book, *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools*, is a useful antidote to the ahistorical approach.

Jennings's role as a staffer for the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce placed him at the center of nearly a half century of federal education policymaking. Want to know about how the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) began? Jennings was present at its creation and can speak about it authoritatively. Want to know about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or the Bilingual Education Act? Jennings was involved in their enactments as well. Jennings describes the motivations of those who authored these federal reforms, the political hurdles they faced, and the ultimate success or failure of those initiatives.

To his credit, Jennings does not act as a cheerleader for past reforms, including those in which he played an important role. For example, in describing the results of Title I, Jennings concludes, "In a nutshell, the billions of dollars spent on Title I had at best a modest effect on the academic



achievement of the disadvantaged students who participated in the program..." On No Child Left Behind (NCLB), he writes, "So it truly was a mixed bag. The spotlight was directed on groups of students whose low performance could have been concealed in the past, and districts were held accountable for every school. The weakness, though, was that tests do not a good education make."

In general, Jennings is less informative in assessing the effectiveness of federal reform efforts than in describing their origins and political struggles. His assessments are based more on a keen sense of what is politically sensible than on rigorous research. Of course, Jennings is not a researcher, and no one should read this book hoping to learn about the latest and best research findings. The appeal of the book is its firsthand history of major federal education reforms and its conventional wisdom account of their effectiveness.

The book's weak understanding of research is most clearly seen in his analysis of the effectiveness of NCLB.

Jennings examines gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as his primary method for determining whether NCLB has been beneficial. He counts how often NAEP gains were greater in the decade before the act's adoption than in the decade after for different grades, subjects, and subgroups. He describes NAEP as "the 'gold standard' of assessment," seemingly unaware that the quality of the assessment does not compensate for the weakness of his simple pre-post comparison research design in trying to determine the effectiveness of a program. Jennings also appears unaware that there are rigorous studies on the effects of NCLB and other high-stakes accountability systems, such as those by Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob (see "Evaluating NCLB," *research*, Summer 2010) and those published by Stanford University researchers Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond in 2005, and Martin Carnoy and Susanna Loeb in 2002.

Jennings nonetheless captures what many elites in Washington, D.C., currently think about past reforms. That may be more important than knowing what rigorous research has to say for understanding future politics.

Unfortunately, Jennings's prescriptions for the future are not very compelling. While acknowledging the limited effectiveness of past federal programs, he never seriously considers that federal solutions are simply unworkable. He has a somewhat charming but naive optimism that if we just change the design and increase the funding, things will be different next time. On this matter, Jennings may have lost touch with the thinking of one cadre

of D.C. elites, whose disillusionment with federally based education reform has become palpable.

Oblivious to the growing opposition to this approach in Congress, Jennings uses the final section of the book to propose a new federal program, the United for Students Act, which is essentially Race to the Top on steroids. It would be bigger and better funded, but it would similarly offer extra money to states if they pursued certain types of policies, including preschool expansion, teacher quality reforms, extra funding for schools with extra challenges, and curriculum changes. Jennings thinks he is being respectful of federalism when he concedes that “a state should be able to choose to apply for the United for Students grant or not,” but he doesn’t seem to grasp that this is the equivalent of saying that states could choose to pay taxes for large programs that other states would get and they would not.

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Jennings titles the section containing this new proposal “Fresh Thinking about the Federal Role in Education,” but there is little that is “fresh” in his thinking. Other than proposing that the new effort be better funded and focused on what he deems to be the critical issues, it is unclear how this new proposal should be expected to

produce something dramatically different from the disappointing results of past efforts. Didn’t past efforts also represent significant increases in funding for their time? Didn’t the designers of past efforts also believe they were focused on the critical issues? Why will federal policy-makers get it right this time if they haven’t managed to do so previously?

Perhaps Jennings’s era as the architect of major federal policy has passed. Jennings’s book is an interesting and informative window into the past, but we shouldn’t look to him for cutting-edge research or compelling proposals for future federal efforts. We can, however, hope that new generations of education reformers make use of Jennings’s accounts of past federal efforts in designing future initiatives that might be more effective.

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