

Arne Duncan's Unlearned Lessons

A window into why the left-right school-reform coalition unraveled

**How Schools Work:
An Inside Account of Failure
and Success from One of the
Nation's Longest-Serving
Secretaries of Education**

by Arne Duncan

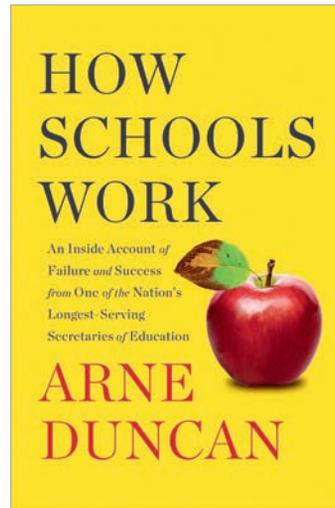
Simon & Schuster, 2018, \$26.99; 256 pages.

As reviewed by Frederick M. Hess

When Arne Duncan was named the ninth U.S. secretary of education in early 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had shown a decade of substantial growth, efforts to launch Common Core and reform teacher evaluation were getting under way with ample support and little opposition, and education seemed a bipartisan bright spot in an increasingly polarized political climate.

Seven years later, when Duncan stepped down, NAEP scores had stagnated, Common Core was a poisoned brand, research on new teacher-evaluation systems painted a picture of failure, and it was hard to find anyone who would still argue that education reform was a bipartisan cause. It would be ludicrous to say any of this was Duncan's "fault," but it's fair to say that his self-certitude, expansive view of his office's role, and impatience with his critics helped bring the great school-reform crackup to pass.

Now, Duncan has written a book about his years in education. It could have been a meditation on why things went awry, what he's learned, and how all this should inform school improvement in the years ahead. That would have been a book well worth reading. Or Duncan might have really taken on the skeptics, answering their strongest criticisms and explaining why the path he chose was the best way forward. Instead, Duncan has opted to pen a breezy exercise in straw men and self-congratulation, while taking credit for "chang[ing]



the education landscape in America." The narrative follows Duncan from his time as a Chicago schools central-office staffer, to his tenure as superintendent in Chicago, to his service in Washington during the early years of President Barack Obama's first term (skipping the second half of Duncan's time in Washington), before closing with his thoughts on gun violence and an eight-point education agenda.

Throughout, Duncan comes across as a nice, extraordinarily confident guy who really likes basketball and has no doubts about how to fix schools or second thoughts about his time in Washington. And readers will be enamored with his mother and role model, Sue Duncan, who is omnipresent in Duncan's tale. Indeed, the book exudes an earnest *Leave It to Beaver* charm, including Duncan's repeated insistence that employees should just "call me Arne." He shares touching profiles of schools and educators and moving accounts of his experiences with the families of students killed by gun violence. He shows admirable verve in describing his success working with a Chicago school system lawyer to find a contractual workaround to make an after-school program logistically feasible, and his later willingness, as superintendent,

to give "Freakonomics" researcher Steven Levitt access to the city's test data in order to flag teacher cheating.

For all that, much of the volume reads more like campaign literature than the exercise in straight talk that he promises. Duncan calls for doubling or tripling the amount America spends on education, avers that "the vast majority of teachers are heroes who are defying the odds," and courageously insists that—no matter what others say—"we must believe in free, high-quality public education."

When it comes to more substantive questions, Duncan suffers from the tendency to divide the world into those who are "for the kids" and those who are not. He writes that, as a young Chicago Public Schools official, "I didn't feel beholden to the office I worked for but instead to kids first." When he agreed to serve as secretary of education, he reports, President-elect Obama told him, "Just do what you think is right for kids and let me worry about the politics." Duncan relates a personal call with new Ohio governor John Kasich, during which Duncan tells Kasich, "I'm here for you, to help your kids. . . . [B]elieve me when I say that I have zero interest in politics."

In Duncan's telling, he has spent a career facing off against those who didn't share his commitment to the kids, battling the "vested interests that are resistant to change and absolutely beholden to the status quo." While he mostly depicts this opposition in shadowy terms, he does name a few of those willing to put politics or selfish agendas before the kids: the Tea Party, the National Rifle Association (NRA), and, rather extraordinarily, U.S. senator Lamar Alexander. (Duncan also dings the teachers unions, but takes care to paint them as misguided rather than malicious.) Of the Tea Party, which Duncan blames

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not-ready-for-prime-time dictates around teacher evaluation or school turnarounds, Duncan relates, “Many states were already undertaking this work—we called them the ‘laboratories for innovation’—and all we wanted to do as federal employees of the Department of Education was help the states amplify and spread their success.” Duncan never acknowledges that skeptics might have shared these goals but had good-faith doubts about Race to the Top or how he went about executing it.

Especially for a guy who presents himself as a truth teller bent on exposing education’s “overripe and rotten lies,” Duncan shows a disconcerting tendency to waffle. When it comes to standards and curriculum, he explains that “if the standards are new, then the curriculum is also new” because they “are distinct yet bonded together”—only to later rip into Common Core critics for failing to appreciate that “the Standards do not dictate curriculum.” Even as he repeatedly declares his faith in tests and

vaguely asserts that Race to the Top and Common Core fueled significant gains, Duncan never once mentions that in fact NAEP gains stalled out under his watch, even falling between 2013 and 2017.

And for a guy who repeatedly professes his talismanic faith in the power of data, Duncan is remarkably willing to set data aside when convenient. At one point, he is moved to enthuse, “I can’t provide data that proves that having a veterinary clinic in a high school leads to higher

graduation rates, or that handing out 16,000 pounds of free food every week leads to better student achievement, but I *know* that they do.” Duncan seemingly never considers that those with doubts about his reforms might truly and honestly feel possessed of similar foresight.

Is *How Schools Work* worth reading? Well, for like-minded partisans, it’s certainly a readable defense of Obama’s K–12 agenda. If you’re a fan of Duncan, it’s a pleasant tale—with heartwarming profiles and tales from Chicago. But readers who weren’t sold on Duncan’s efforts are likely to come away with their doubts confirmed. In the end, Duncan’s biggest contribution here may be the unwitting window he offers into why Obama-era school reform disappointed and the left-right school-reform coalition unraveled.

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