The Education Reform Book Is Dead

Long live education reform

By Jay P. Greene

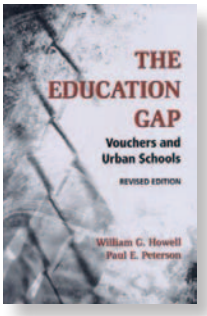
For this 10th anniversary issue, *Education Next* asked me to highlight the education reform books, released over the last decade, that define currently dominant education-reform strategies. For any previous decade, this would be relatively easy to do. But picking a recent education-reform book that 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.

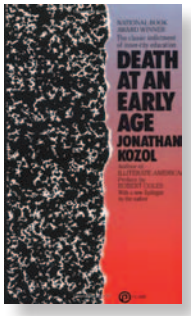
If we were talking about the 1960s, I could easily offer Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* as the articulation of that era's strategy of increasing resources devoted to education, particularly for minority students. The revival of progressive education, with open classrooms, student-centered learning, 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*.

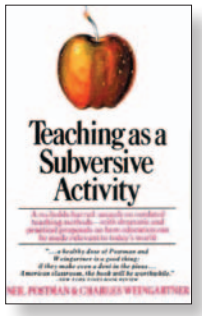
The first decade of the 21st century has also had a dominant strategy: incentive-based reforms, such as increasing competition among charter and district schools, merit-pay plans to improve teacher quality, and school-level accountability based on testing. But no single book or set of books stands out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

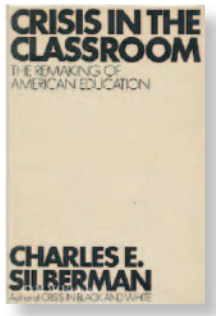
Rather than articulating a broad, theoretical case for reforms that have been embraced by policymakers, the books of the "aughts" were more likely to engage in debates over evidence, articulate a strategy that had not been adopted, or do battle against the strategies that policymakers did adopt. (See 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.)

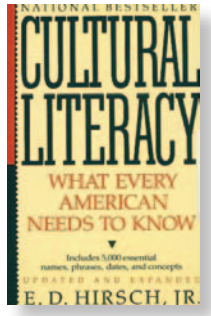
My own book, *Education Myths*, may have bolstered efforts to enact the incentive-based reforms that dominated the decade, but it did not provide the conceptual rationale for the movement. William Howell and Paul Peterson's *Education Gap* was more a review of the evidence from voucher experiments than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

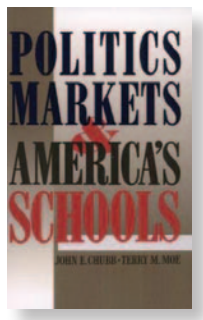












New media are displacing books as the primary means by which intellectual policy movements are formed and sustained.

are also primarily reviews of the current research rather than the articulation of a new reform strategy.

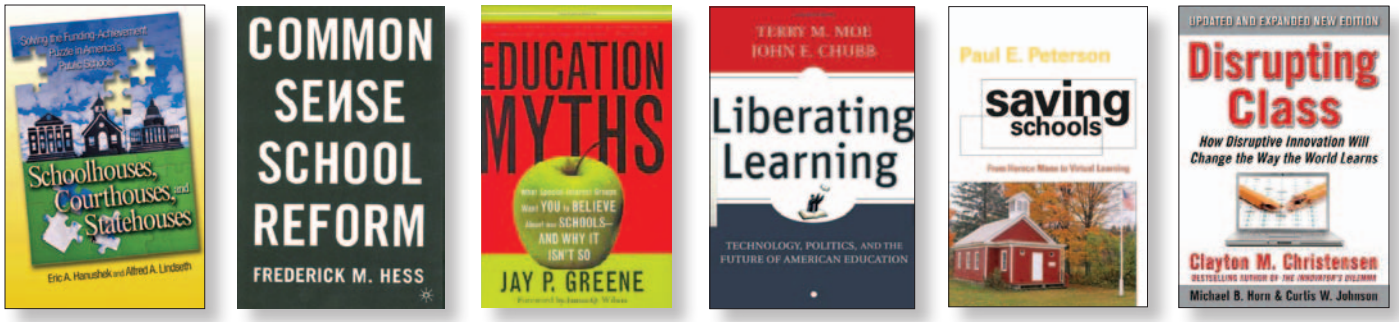
Some books from the aughts did make theoretical arguments for new reforms, but those reforms have not been embraced by policymakers, at least not yet. Terry Moe and John Chubb's *Liberating Learning*, Paul Peterson's *Saving Schools*, and Clayton Christensen et al.'s *Disrupting Class* all make the case 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.

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."

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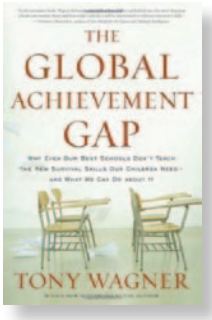
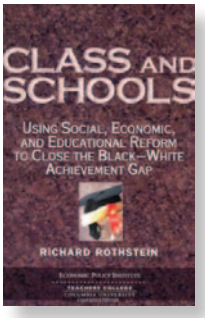
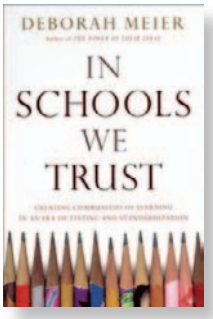
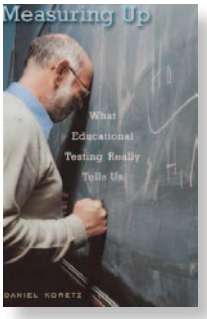
Moreover, if book authors seek policy influence, they have to write with policy elites as their target audience. It may sell a lot of books to write for teachers or education-school students, but those people no longer dominate policymaking discussions. There is a new set of elites interested in education 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.

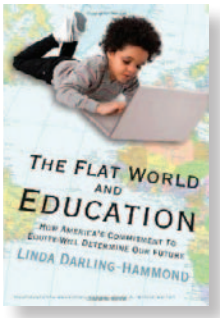
Of course, there is nothing wrong with books that are not written with policy influence as their primary objective. The book geared for an academic audience or designed to encourage a partisan base will continue to have its place. But if there is a lesson from the last decade of education reform books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

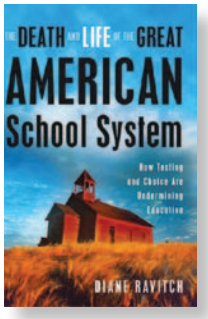












But books are no longer up to the task of significantly altering, let alone stopping, education policy trends. Policy agendas are being shaped by online debates, articles, conferences, and documentary films—not by books. In policy terms, the education reform book is dead, even as education reform thrives.

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.

Jay P. Greene is professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, senior fellow at the George W. Bush Institute, and contributing editor at Education Next.

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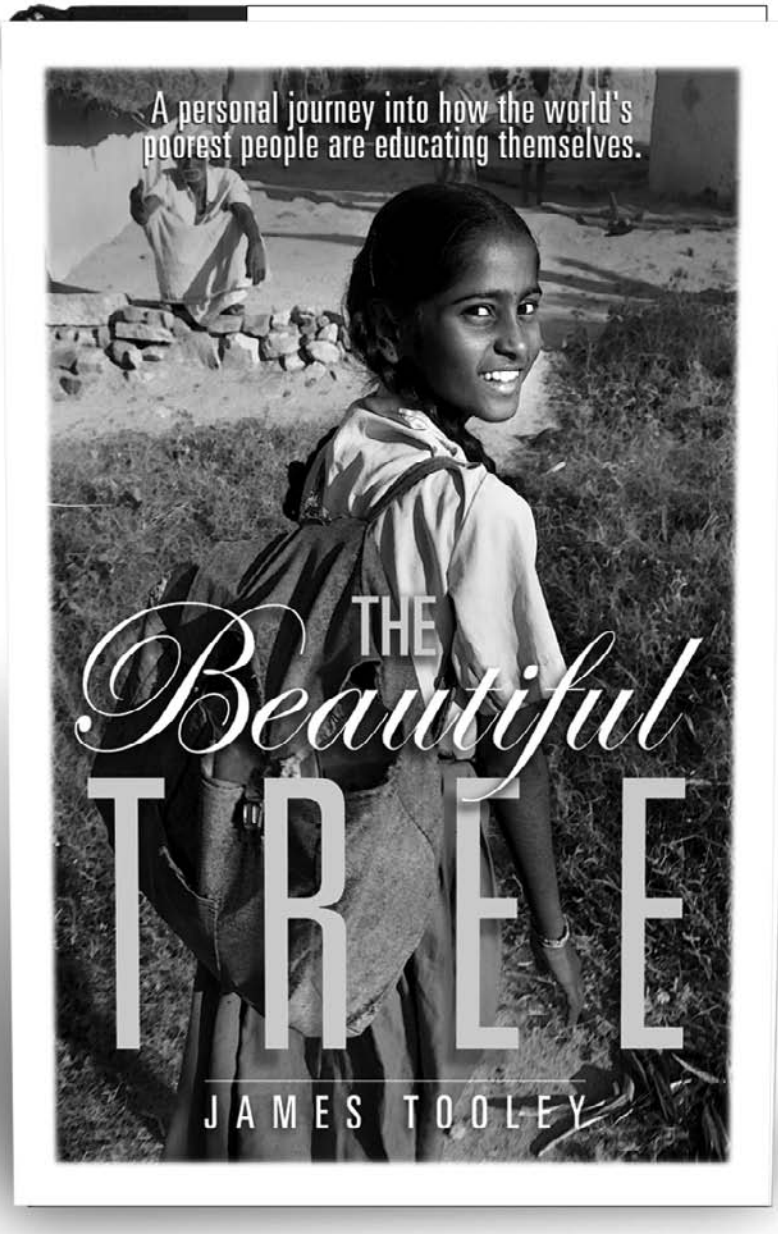

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Tools for Teachers

Effective teaching is a matter of skill

Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College

By Doug Lemov

Jossey-Bass, 2010, $27.95; 352 pages.

As reviewed by Robert Pondiscio

The first five words of Doug Lemov's book *Teach Like a Champion* are "Great teaching is an art." This is not a promising start.

Over 3 million women and men stand in front of classrooms every day in the U.S. It is too much to hope for, and always will be, that more than a small percentage of them will be artists, great, bad or mediocre. The degree to which we pin our hopes for large-scale school improvement on attracting artists and rock stars to the classroom is the degree to which we plan to fail.

Yet all is not lost. After dispensing with five poorly chosen words, Lemov spends the next 300 pages completely contradicting them, demonstrating in convincing detail that teaching is not an art at all, but a craft, a series of techniques that can be identified, learned, practiced, and perfected. His focused, obsessively practical study of what makes teachers effective could—and should—shift the terms of our increasingly vitriolic national debate from "teacher quality" to "quality teaching." This is no mere semantic distinction. The difference is not who is in the front of the room. The difference is *what that person does*. Lemov's achievement is to examine teaching at the molecular level. By doing so, he may have rescued education reform from its implicit dependence on classroom saints and superheroes. It is an indispensable shift. If teaching effectively is something for the best and the brightest, rather than the merely dedicated and diligent, education reform is finished, now and forever.

"Many of the techniques you will read about in this book at first may seem mundane, unremarkable, even disappointing," Lemov begins apologetically. Don't be fooled by his modesty. The managing director of Uncommon Schools, a network of successful charter schools in New York and New Jersey, Lemov has invested thousands of hours in classroom observations, work that has made him a sought-after consultant to ed reform icons such as KIPP, New Leaders for New Schools, Teach For America, and others. Under Lemov's watchful eye, the subtle magic of solid craftwork is revealed: Stand still when giving directions; ask students who have *not* raised their hands to answer a question; use "wait time," a few seconds' pause after asking a question before calling on a student to answer it. Each technique is intended to improve classroom management, enhance student engagement, raise expectations, and to do so briskly.

The proper question is not how do we get rid of bad teachers, but how can we make our existing teacher corps more effective?

Lemov is obsessed with time and the amount of it wasted moving from one place to another, putting materials away, or transitioning to a new lesson or activity. "There isn't a school of education in the country that would stoop to teach its aspiring teachers how to train their students to pass out papers," he writes, "even though it is one of the most valuable things they could possibly do." As Lemov calculates, the time saved on such mundane tasks quickly adds up to days of extra instructional time over a school year.

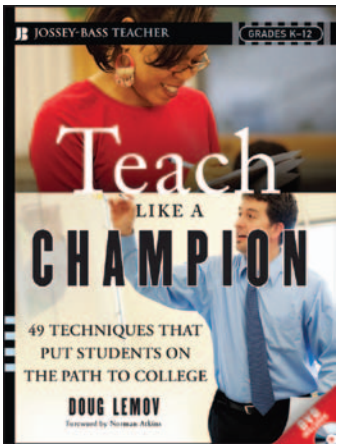
If *Teach Like a Champion* fails to become a standard text in our schools of education, however, it will not be a function of the utilitarian thrust of Lemov's observations, but his refusal to pay even lip service to the standard homilies of effective practice. Guide on the side? Self-directed learning? Lemov favors students in rows as the default classroom structure. Culturally relevant pedagogy? Substitute rap lyrics for lyric poetry? "Content is one of the places that teaching is most vulnerable to assumptions and stereotypes. What does it say," Lemov asks, "if we assume that students won't be inspired by books written by authors of other races?" Volumes have been written on differentiated instruction. Lemov gives it a single, not very deferential paragraph. Group work is "as likely to yield discussions of last night's episode of *American Idol* as it is higher-order

discussions of content." Asking frequent, targeted, rigorous questions of students, he believes, "is a powerful and much simpler tool for differentiating."

"One of the biggest ironies I hope you will take away from reading this book is that many of the tools likely to yield the strongest classroom results remain essentially beneath the notice of our theories and theorists of education," he writes. It is hard not to agree.

At no point in *Teach Like a Champion* does Lemov explicitly state that his goal is to wipe out the beau ideal of the rock star teacher. He doesn't need to. If we're fortunate, it will wither away once Lemov's taxonomy takes root. In the popular imagination, fueled by Hollywood, hero teachers are charismatic figures, endowed with an unshakable will, and a deep, abiding belief in the untapped genius of their (inevitably) unruly students. Miracle-working mavericks, they defy the forces of mediocrity arrayed against them and magically transform a class full of *those kids*—the ones the "system" and every other adult in the building—nay, the world—has long since given up on. Good-bye, poverty, gangs, and mean streets. Hello, Harvard. And if one teacher can work such wonders, surely it is not too much to expect them all to do it. The exceptions prove what the rule should be. No excuses. Whatever it takes. Relentless pursuit. What part of "*every child* can succeed at the highest level" do you not understand?

Readers hoping for stock tales of hero teachers will be disappointed. *Teach Like a Champion* features many teachers, but they are master craftsmen, not superheroes. Describing grammatically correct complete sentences as "the battering ram that knocks down the door to college" is as close to hyperbole as Lemov gets. He sees high expectations as essential to student achievement, but not an occasion for grandstanding and motivational speeches. Instead, it's about running a classroom where participation is not optional, standards are clear, and no apologies are made for rigor. Mastering sound teaching techniques "will be far more productive than being firm of convictions, committed to a strategy, and, in the end, beaten by the reality of what lies inside the classroom door in the toughest neighborhoods of our cities and towns," says Lemov.



Teach Like a Champion is not a perfect book. Its advice is broadly applicable, but its sweet spot is elementary and middle-school teachers in low-performing urban schools. Veteran teachers who work in other settings may wonder what all the fuss is about, and Lemov's definition of effective teaching as getting big test gains in low-income schools may be too narrow for some.

Still, Uncommon Schools runs 17 charter schools in New York, which as a group outperform state averages in both math and English language arts (ELA). Two of its Brooklyn schools have posted math scores that were the best in the state, Excellence Boys Charter School (6th grade) and Kings Collegiate Charter School (7th grade); ELA test scores of 8th graders at True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School in Rochester placed that school at number 6 out of 1,450 schools tested. While that's not proof positive of effectiveness, there is an intuitive, even visceral appeal to Lemov's techniques. Keeping all students engaged and attentive is surely better than failing to do so. There is no conceivable downside to lengthening learning time by wasting less of the school day. Teachers seem not to be waiting for gold-standard research to validate the 49 techniques in Lemov's taxonomy as effective. Six months after publication, *Teach Like a Champion* was still a top education book and overall best seller on Amazon.com. Doug Lemov has struck gold, and a nerve.

Seldom has a book been better timed or more urgently needed. Walk into a struggling urban school and you will mostly find well-intentioned people working hard and failing. More often than not, they're failing despite doing precisely what they've been trained to do. The proper question is not how do we get rid of bad teachers, but how can we make our existing teacher corps more effective? Thus, perhaps the highest praise that one can heap on Mr. Lemov's book is that, for the first time, it makes helping teachers improve their craft on a broad scale seem not merely sensible, but achievable.

A former 5th-grade teacher, Robert Pondiscio writes about education at the Core Knowledge Blog. For his take on Steve Farr's Teaching as Leadership, *see our blog at educationnext.org.*