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

Harvard University Press, 2010, $27.95; 304 pages.

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 burden 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 before.

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 Socratics). 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 multiculturalism, 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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"The scores for our latest standardized tests are disappointing. We have to articulate a coherent policy of obfuscation."

Whatever Happened to Integration?

Reviving the ideal of the common school

Five Miles Away, A World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America

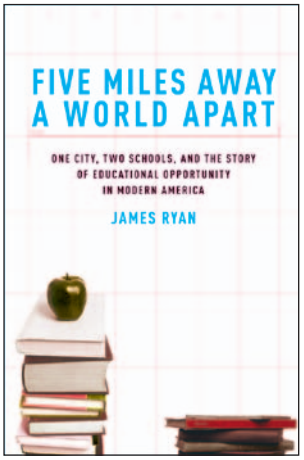
By James E. Ryan

Oxford University Press, 2010, $29.95; 384 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

The two schools referred to in the title of this book are Thomas Jefferson ("Tee-Jay") High School in Richmond, Virginia, and Freeman High School, in suburban Henrico County. They show the contrasts we would expect between a high school in an urban and predominantly black school district, and one in a suburban, predominantly white, and middle-class county. But these schools do not play the central role in this book: they make intermittent appearances, illustrating a very detailed account of how legal efforts have failed in the 56 years since the historic *Brown* decision to overcome the effects of the segregation of black and poor students.

The overall verdict of the author, a professor of law at the University of Virginia, is that these efforts have failed primarily because we have not been able to bring together urban and suburban school districts to reduce the concentrations of black students. His plea for greater integration as *the* road to improving educational outcomes for poor and black students closely echoes that recently made by Gerald Grant in his *Hope and Despair in the American City: Why there are no bad schools in Raleigh* (see "Tale of Two Cities," *book review*, Spring 2010). This may well be true, but it is surprising to see such strong advocacy for the racial integration of schools at a time when the prospects for any public action—executive, legislative, or judicial—to combine for purposes of integrating urban and suburban school districts are just about nonexistent.



None of the other legal approaches show much promise, Ryan argues. He reviews the complex tangle of legal efforts to increase state support for urban schools, by way of litigation based on state constitutions. This followed another Supreme Court check to federal action to equalize or increase support to urban schools. Little has been accomplished after decades of litigation and much admonition of state legislatures by state supreme courts. Nor is Ryan optimistic that the problem would have been ameliorated if these efforts had been more successful: "Tee-Jay" already spends in excess of $4,000 more per student than Freeman, with worse results. And he refers to the enormous increase in expenditures for Kansas City schools in the wake of a desegregation suit, and its limited results (see my review of *Complex Justice* by Joshua M. Dunn, "Finding the Right Remedy," *book review*, Spring 2009).

Increased expenditure, Ryan argues, is a poor substitute for integration: It "take[s] as given—either as a matter of strategy or necessity—that poor and minority districts will remain separate from white and wealthier ones…. [It] channel[s] resources to poor struggling districts, which are usually in urban or rural areas, while protecting the independence and sanctity of wealthy districts, which are usually in suburbs. Save the cities, and spare the suburbs." Ryan again and again argues that the suburban middle class has been able to protect its schools from what it sees as the threat of integration.

Ryan is more positive about the varieties of school choice—whether within school districts, or by way of charter schools and vouchers, and of course he favors interdistrict choice—but the legislative and judicial obstacles (not to mention practical ones) to the expansion of this route are clear. Nor is Ryan optimistic about the impact of the standards and testing movement, primarily because the bars have been set too low, which means that the urban schools, placing all their efforts into passing, manage to do so, while the suburban schools easily surpass the state's yardsticks. So "Tee-Jay" does not look so bad when tested by Virginia's standards, but Freeman pays the state standard little mind, as its students go on further to AP courses and tests: "A reform that might have tied urban and suburban schools together has been transformed into yet another one that reinforces the gap that separates them. Standards and

testing promise, essentially, that urban students will learn the basics. Meanwhile, the suburban students, while not immune from standards and testing, are certainly not limited by them."

Ryan argues for integration not only because he believes it will improve educational outcomes for black students, but also because of his commitment to the ideal of the common school, which promises to bring together Americans of all economic circumstances, and all races and groups. Ryan is distressed that this hope seems to play so small a role in our politics and public discussion. "In Search of Ties That Bind" is the title of his penultimate chapter, in which he explores the possibilities of integration in the current bleak situation. He is aware that "it is unfashionable these days to talk seriously about ways to increase racial and socioeconomic integration. The goal seems not only impossible but also increasingly beside the point…. To talk about integration is to talk about a relic from the past or a distracting frill."

In this situation, he places his hopes for integration on the varieties of free choice and, seeking signs that we may yet become a more integrated society, finds some promise. The proportion of minorities in the population is increasing, which inevitably means more minorities in predominantly white schools. More blacks are moving to suburbs (as increasingly are other minorities, e.g., Asian and Hispanic), and more whites are returning to (some) cities. We should not exaggerate the significance of these moves: minorities do not share the same interests and ideals in schooling, and even the least advantaged ones, blacks and Hispanic Americans, may not look on their situations the same way. And the movement of blacks into suburbs very often re-creates the economically struggling neighborhoods they have left in the cities. Nevertheless, it is promising to note that "Tee-Jay" has a substantial white minority student body (16 percent), while Freeman has a sizable black minority (13 percent). That still makes them black and white schools, but this is quite different from the 100 percent black and white schools of 1954, and for many years after. Ryan is encouraged by the example of Montclair, New Jersey, and some other municipalities in maintaining integrated communities over time, and by the longtime maintenance of METCO in the Boston area, and hopes that further interdistrict programs might be launched.

One cannot be too optimistic about the reach of these developments that are increasing integration: they are operating slowly. In the end, is there any escape from the reality that the improvement of educational outcomes for a large section of the black population will have to take place, if it is to come about at all, in schools with a black majority?

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"Take out your phones. Open the American History app and turn to the page about George Washington."