

Tinkering Toward Utopia:

A Century of Public School Reform

BY DAVID TYACK AND LARRY CUBAN

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We Americans frequently declare that authors dealing with complex issues and institutions are so narrowly focused on the trees that they fail to see and explain the forest and the forces that maintain it. Sometimes we assert the opposite — we criticize undue attention to the forest and neglect of the health and fortunes of each tree. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, professors of education at Stanford University, have managed to steer clear of both of these sins in *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, their brief and masterful overview of one hundred years of school reform in the United States.

No one has done it better! Tyack and Cuban fully deserve their 1995 Harvard University Press annual award for an outstanding publication about education and society, and their thoughtful perspectives on a century of reform efforts to improve U.S. schools would almost certainly have delighted the late Lawrence Cremin, the "dean" of educational historians in the United States.

Professors Tyack and Cuban start with the proposition that Americans have long seen their schools as a major agency for building a better society by enriching the skills, learning, and viewpoints of its citizens. They then lead us from these utopian dreams to the realization that perfecting schools has been, and continues to be, a slow game, and the well-chosen title for this short but incisive book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, is a happy and almost poetic summary of the book's message: that today's so-called "school reform movement" has had numerous predecessors whose proud and confident announcements of their prescriptions for millennial achievements didn't work out, or did so only partly.

The authors, however, carefully avoid the irresponsible, negative rhetoric that has dominated judgments about U.S. schools since the National Commission on Excellence in Education launched its error-laden condemnation of public education in 1983 through its publication of *A Nation at Risk*. Tyack and Cuban characterize that diatribe as "an ideological smoke screen . . . [that] has restricted discussion of educational purposes and obscured rather than clarified the most pressing problems, especially those of the schools that educate the quarter of American students who live in poverty" (p. 34). The authors go on to challenge directly the veracity of a widely claimed learning decline defined by test scores, and argue with conviction that the need for school reform today is not, as *A Nation at Risk* asserts, brought about by

America's failure to compete internationally. Tyack and Cuban point out that international comparisons of student achievement are plagued by problems of non-equivalence among groups of students taking the exams. For example, Tyack and Cuban, citing the work of Iris Rotberg, show that some international math and science assessments compared the average scores of 75 percent of the U.S. student population in a particular age range with the top 9 percent of students in West Germany, the top 13 percent of students in the Netherlands, and the top 45 percent in Sweden (p. 36). Tyack and Cuban also note the different curriculum patterns for students in the various countries that can affect test scores, and that different groups of students bring different levels of motivation to the test: "in some nations — Korea, for example — pupils are expected to uphold the national honor, whereas many U.S. youths regard the test as yet another boring set of blanks to pencil in on answer sheets" (p. 36).

In a fascinating chapter entitled "Policy Cycles and Institutional Trends," Tyack and Cuban offer a rubric for thinking about change in U.S. schools in all its variety. By differentiating among "policy talk," "policy action," and "implementation of change," the authors help the reader to understand the nature and meaning of contradictory prescriptions for school reform. Although this analysis seems to characterize much of planned change in schools as disorderly, it also helps to explain why that is so. A major conclusion regarding these relationships suggests that a truly democratic society roiled by social and economic change is likely to have such experiences.

The long-term perspective that radiates from every chapter of this study brings to light an understanding of the contrasts among school reform efforts. For example, in the post-World War II years, James Bryant Conant (a president of Harvard University) fashioned and implanted a vision for the American high school that banished small schools in favor of large ones with annual graduating classes of over one hundred students. As far as I know, no top limit on size was ever suggested. It was argued that such large schools could offer a broader and deeper curriculum to meet the learning needs of the growing variety of student backgrounds, as a higher percentage of each age group aspired each year to complete high school and attend college. But here we are now, more than thirty years later, arguing that large schools produce feelings of alienation and anonymity among students and isolation among staff.

Another contrast is found in the business community's posture toward schools: "In the early twentieth century, businessmen like Pierre S. DuPont were certain that centralization of control and regulation by experts was the key to school improvement, whereas today businessmen like Pete DuPont argue, to the contrary, that decentralization, deregulation and choice will cure what is wrong with education" (p. 41).

Additional contrasts such as these emerge as the authors enlighten us with the meaning, and sometimes the unforeseen effects, of concepts for change like "restructuring" schools, "systemic" approaches to changes in schools, and the pros and cons of "top-down" and "bottom-up" prescriptions for what to teach and how to teach it. My own sense of this new

vocabulary about school reform is that to some extent it has assumed the same role as the prayer book of the Episcopal Church — by repeating the words you are supposed to be improving yourself and the world around you.

Other discussions, mainly toward the end of the book, illuminate our understanding of the frantic nature of school reform in the 1980s and 1990s. These analyses by Tyack and Cuban make it clear that the large-scale frenetic adoption of quickly conceived proposals, some old and some new, has become the mainstream of current school reform.

One of the great strengths of the authors' analysis of recent school reform is a regular referral to where teachers stand as the winds of school reform blow around them from sources as removed from the understanding of schooling and its daily practice as the president of the United States, the fifty governors, and numerous corporate CEOs. These parties, of course, are mostly mired in the mistaken views of *A Nation At Risk*. Many of the insights the authors identify about the roles of teachers, parents, and students come from a relatively new breed of education researchers, who spend time in schools and classrooms rather than seeking generalizations about schooling by interpreting national data streams — a useful addition to the analysis of schooling.

Because this book combines the wisdom of its authors with a thoughtful review of the prior research of many others, its thirty pages of endnotes are particularly valuable: they constitute a gold mine for future doctoral students in education. The authors make these endnotes easy to use by printing the page numbers of the corresponding text at the top of each endnote page.

Another notable strength of the book is its conciseness. Readers of *Tinkering Toward Utopia* regularly benefit from succinct statements that summarize the authors' views on complex issues. Any good book does this, but my reading of the prose in this brief volume makes me see the expressive powers of its writers as unusually vivid and precise. In the realm of writing about education, this aspect of the book is a rare occurrence, as education, in my experience, runs close to sociology in its capacity to generate turgid prose.

Although I have no quarrels with the findings of Professors Tyack and Cuban, I wish they had given more space to two matters. The first issue is the impact and future prospects of racial and cultural issues in U.S. society as they interact with what goes on within schools and classrooms: this is a concern with a long history, many top-down pressures, probably just as many bottom-up opportunities, a major factor in preparing teachers as well as re-educating those now in classrooms, and ultimately a significant arbiter in whether or not the United States can attain a truly open and free society. The second issue is the rapidly growing interest of school reformers in shifting their ground from a somewhat narrow concern for schooling to a recognition that a child's education is only partly in schools, and a belief that other agencies can join with schools to fashion an education that recognizes that a child's time in school from birth to age eighteen constitutes less than 10 percent of his or her time

during those years.

Each of these areas of concern has developed a massive literature of social science on the one hand and moral advocacy on the other, and each reaches back many years to a history dominated by ideological thinking rather than rational analysis. Although Tyack and Cuban discuss these issues in several parts of this book, they don't get the attention they might. At a time when our federal government is considering the dismantling of its already inadequate safety net for children, youth, and poor families and the abandonment of school desegregation, we very much need the kind of clarity on these matters that Professors Tyack and Cuban bring to other highly complex issues. Could it be that they see these matters as large, external social policy issues without immediate consequences for the classroom? I doubt it.

No doubt these two assertions would qualify in the spirit of this book as elements of utopia. If so, so be it. But don't these thoughts raise the question of whether utopia might be a useful entity to have around, even if we know we can't fully attain it? Quite clearly this book says just that. Its message about "tinkering" isn't entirely negative. Much of the slow progress our schools have made in the last hundred years is a by-product of tinkering by reformers. The chapters on "How Schools Change Reforms" and "Why the Grammar of Schooling Persists" are wonderfully wise analyses to undergird our posture toward school reform. If we can learn to understand what schools are really like, this study says to us between the lines, we might even learn to tinker more effectively.

Finally, I want to speculate further about the potential of the imaginative title of this book. My guess is that its meaning can be legitimately extended to all issues that democratic societies face. Inevitably, reaching for social or economic change is a slow and complex process. Isn't the message these two professors from Stanford have brought us under the banner of Tinkering Toward Utopia very much the same message as that of Robert Browning, which is so often quoted: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?"

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