

The Blackboard and the Bottom Line: Why Schools Can't Be Businesses

By Larry Cuban

Reviewed by Marilyn H. King

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In a recent interview about adequate yearly progress with a reporter from my local newspaper, I was asked why raising test scores is so difficult despite state standards and federal legislation. I used an analogy about widgets and students in an effort to underscore the profound differences between products manufactured on assembly lines and the education of children. Why then are school reform models often shaped by marketplace principles and practices? That is the question Larry Cuban, an emeritus professor of education at Stanford University and a scholar on the history of U.S. education, tackles in *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line: Why Schools Can't Be Businesses*. Take the slogan "All children can learn," made famous by the effective schools movement in the 1980s, add industry-supported standards-based reform bolstered by federal clout, and we wind up with No Child Left Behind legislation. Cuban provides insightful historical, social and political perspectives on the influence business and industry has had on education from 1890 to 1930 and again over the last three decades, right up to NCLB. Why have industry-founded reforms been so influential in establishing new goals and modifying curricula, school organization and governance, yet they have had only a minor impact on the effectiveness of teaching and the level of student achievement? Among his more interesting angles, Cuban chronicles the introduction of the personal computer in American classrooms. He describes its mostly uneven and unproven effect on teaching and learning. More broadly, Cuban, a former superintendent, asserts that assessments of school reform policy implementation and results are largely absent. Even when present, he adds, such assessments tend to be ignored by educational leaders, thus perpetuating traditional school organization and teaching practices. (*The Blackboard and the Bottom Line: Why Schools Can't Be Businesses* by Larry Cuban, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, 253 pp. with index, \$23.95 softcover) In a recent interview about adequate yearly progress with a reporter from my local newspaper, I was asked why raising test scores is so difficult despite state standards and federal legislation. I used an analogy about widgets and students in an effort to underscore the profound differences between products manufactured on assembly lines and the education of children.

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"Ford Motor Company would not have survived the competition had it not been for an emphasis on results. We must view education the same way," the U.S. Secretary of Education declared in 2003. But is he right? In this provocative new book, Larry Cuban takes aim at the alluring cliché that schools should be more businesslike, and shows that in its long history in business-minded America, no one has shown that a business model can be successfully applied to education.

In this straight-talking book, one of the most distinguished scholars in education charts the Gilded Age beginnings of the influential view that American schools should be organized to meet the needs of American businesses, and run according to principles of cost-efficiency, bottom-line thinking, and customer satisfaction.

Not only are schools by their nature not businesslike, Cuban argues, but the attempt to run them along business lines leads to dangerous over-standardization--of tests, and of goals for our children. Why should we think that there is such a thing as one best school? Is "college for all" achievable--or even desirable? Even if it were possible, do we really want schools to operate as bootcamps for a workforce? Cuban suggests that the best business-inspired improvement for American education would be more consistent and sustained on-the-job worker training, tailored for the job to be done, and business leaders' encouragement--and adoption--of an ethic of civic engagement and public service.

Oversold and Underused: Computers in the Classroom by Larry Cuban

Impelled by a demand for increasing American strength in the new global economy, many educators, public officials, business leaders, and parents argue that school computers and Internet access will improve academic learning and prepare students for an information-based workplace.

But just how valid is this argument? In *Oversold and Underused*, one of the most respected voices in American education argues that when teachers are not given a say in how the technology might reshape schools, computers are merely souped-up typewriters and classrooms continue to run much as they did a generation ago. In his studies of early childhood, high school, and university classrooms in Silicon Valley, Larry Cuban found that students and teachers use

the new technologies far less in the classroom than they do at home, and that teachers who use computers for instruction do so infrequently and unimaginatively.

Cuban points out that historical and organizational economic contexts influence how teachers use technical innovations. Computers can be useful when teachers sufficiently understand the technology themselves, believe it will enhance learning, and have the power to shape their own curricula. But these conditions can't be met without a broader and deeper commitment to public education beyond preparing workers. More attention, Cuban says, needs to be paid to the civic and social goals of schooling, goals that make the question of how many computers are in classrooms trivial.

Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform

Excerpts from a Conversation at the Askwith Education Forum

Harvard Graduate School of Education March 1, 2004

A story from Ed., the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education

School reform has been one of the most hotly debated topics for the better part of the last century. Parents, teachers, business leaders, and U.S. presidents have all pronounced their prescriptions for repairing the American education system. Last year, when HGSE selected four books that all members of the Ed School community could read and discuss as part of the shared reading list instituted by HGSE's Academic Cabinet, it was not a surprise that one volume in the shared reading series focused sharply on school reform.

David Tyack and Larry Cuban, co-authors of *Tinkering toward Utopia*

Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform explores the dynamic tension between Americans' faith in education as a panacea and the difficulty of improving educational practices. Co-authors David B. Tyack and Larry Cuban, two of the country's leading scholars on the subject, discussed their ideas at an Askwith Education Forum last spring. Tyack is the Vida Jacks Professor of Education and professor of history emeritus at Stanford University, and Cuban is professor of education emeritus at Stanford and past president of the American Educational Research Association.

David Tyack:

Policy talk in education has too often overstated what is wrong with schools, and understated how hard it is to get from here to there. If you look at the history of reform, you can argue that reforms haven't done much of a job of changing schools. In fact, the school reforms that promise to start from scratch and reinvent education from the bottom up almost always fall flat on their faces.

If you look at schools, they're amazing, robust institutions. They've been able to survive wars and depressions and massive immigration and even reformers who want to make them over. In the middle of these difficulties, like the Great Depression of the 1930s, people looked on schools as part of the solution, not as the major part of the problem. According to the Gallup polls, Americans believed in the progress of education for a century and a half and then, so fast, lost their faith in education. All but a tiny handful of people said, "My kids are getting a better education than I did." Find an adult who'll say that today. So the question is, why have we

become preoccupied with failure after having such a long history of believing in progress through education?

Here's one answer: When school systems don't achieve [the goals designed by politicians], trust diminishes. Back in 1991, the nation's governors and the senior President Bush signed Goals 2000, which promised that every school would be free of drugs and violence, that every American adult would be literate, and that American students would be first in the world in science and mathematics by the year 2000. That was 12 years ago, and those goals still haven't been realized.

Larry and I both agree that our picture of [an improved educational system] is not the brilliant light at the end of the tunnel, but rather the "tinkering" of reforms that last. In *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, we argued that the purposes of education and the way of judging success have been radically narrowed. School reforms are now designed to enhance the economic advancement of the individual and the international competition of the country. And the way that schools today will be judged on whether they're doing a good job is test scores.

Test scores have come to mean accountability. They also turn teachers into professional accountants, instead of people who are professionally accountable. The biggest problem today really is how to keep good teachers in teaching. We have a big flow in and a big flow out. And often, the ones who leave are the ones who don't like all these affronts to their dignity. For goodness sake, let's stop talking about the financial value of education and talk instead about human capital, about schools helping to create people who are fully developed as human beings and as democratic citizens.

Larry and I wrote this book to help instigate that fundamental change. We also wrote this book with the hope that more reform will take place inside schools, and that teachers will not only be consulted but be the most active agents in those reforms.

Larry Cuban:

Today's teachers have become—to borrow a popular military phrase—"the soldiers of reform." Yet no teachers' thumbprint or signature can be seen on state and federal policies of the past quarter-century. Consequently, these policies confront many teachers with very practical dilemmas. How much time do I take out of what I want to teach to prepare students for high-stakes tests? Can I continue to teach in ways that get at independent thinking, deeper understanding of concepts, and working together on intellectual tasks when I am being held responsible for raising my students' test scores? How can I remain true to my goals for teaching and not hurt my students' futures?

Few policymakers consider these daily dilemmas because they see teachers largely as technicians who put into practice what needs to be done. But no sustained improvement will occur without qualified and experienced teachers working together with the larger community to improve schools. And this, of course, is the policymakers' dilemma.

The proposed reforms, outside and inside schools—to reduce the test-score gap between whites and poor minorities; to help poor minority families increase their income through steady work at livable wages and then their children's test scores will improve; to establish research-proven

reading programs for every single, poor, or minority child; to give each kid a laptop computer—are endless and uncertain in their outcomes. Confidence in one or the other of these proposals is a matter of faith, not a scientific finding. Fierce struggles are generated over which reform gets adopted. These battles are about political power, control, and access to resources.

A steady concentration of state and federal authority has strengthened top-down decision-making, particularly in big cities where mayors and noneducators run schools. On the 20th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, most states have assumed far greater control over local funding, curriculum, testing and governance than existed in 1983.

The consensus among business leaders, policymakers, teachers' unions, and civic groups of what constitutes a good school has converged with a view of schooling that many parents and taxpayers have held for decades. I'm talking about standards-based reform. A single best approach to schooling, however—and this is a big however—hardly fits a diverse, democratic, and multipurpose institution like public schools.

The second consequence of the standards movement is the blindness to the poverty of most urban and rural schools. Current state and federal strategies place the full burden upon schools and schools alone to remedy low academic performance. At best, this strategy of leaning on schools alone is inadequate; at worst, it willfully ignores a history filled with examples of reform-minded elites expecting schools to solve severe social problems and then blaming students, teachers, and administrators for failing to remedy those very same problems.

To reduce inequalities between high-, middle-, and low-income communities, more—not less—must be done for and with those who go to poor schools and who staff those schools. Treating all schools as the same means that you keep the status quo. A combination of out-of-school and in-school strategies are needed to reduce this corrosive impact of poverty on families and communities and the lack of qualified and experienced teachers and principals. The current strategy that schools alone can do the job of reducing social inequalities, including the test score gap between minorities and whites, is simply flawed. But which reforms, inside and outside schools, have the most payoff for poor students and their families? Well, let me set matters straight very quickly. No one knows for sure. Scientific studies cannot completely establish the best reform because reforming schools is essentially a series of political acts, rather than technical solutions to problems. Few elected policymakers dare to say any of these words now.

About the Article: A version of this article originally appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of *Ed.*, the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

More information about the Askwith Education Forums is available in the **HGSE Events Calendar** [http://hugse9.harvard.edu/gsedata/calendar_pkg.forums]