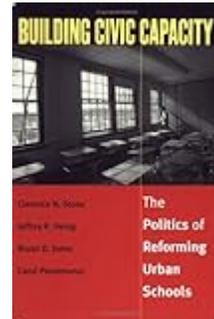




**Clarence N. Stone, Jeffrey R. Henig, Bryan D. Jones, Carol Pierannunzi.** *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Studies in Government and Public Policy. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001. x + 197 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1118-8.



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## Making Sense of Urban Educational Reform

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One of the most debated subjects inside and outside the academy is the reform of public education, especially urban education. It is also one of the most contentious. Everyone, it seems, has a solution to the “crisis in education.” Over the years, education specialists, economists, demographers, historians, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and politicians have participated in the debate over educational reform. In *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*, four distinguished political scientists address this controversial topic. And, as you might expect, they see politics as the ultimate solution. In fact, the opening sentence of their excellent introduction to this volume says it all: “America spent most of the twentieth century trying to take politics out of education. That was a mistake” (p. 1).

These authors argue that educational reform has failed over the years not because of indifference among various groups within urban society but because “diffuse concerns” could never generate a “community synergy” necessary to sustain a long-term educational reform. For these specialists, only the elected politician can resolve

the conflicting values among various groups in society and deal with “the complexity of joint action.” The politician, moreover, is the only one who can turn short-term alliances into permanent institutionalized relationships in order to achieve real reform (p. 2).

But the image of politicians effectively drawing together disparate and conflicting groups within society and bringing about meaningful educational reform appears to run counter to historical reality. Nevertheless, the authors argue that while there have been problems in the past, the solution to urban educational reform is “within the political realm” (p. 4). They note that our negative attitude toward politics in education has two intellectual roots. The first is the image of politicians huddling in “smoke-filled rooms” and manipulating corrupt political organizations for their own gain. The second has to do with the continual micro-management of education by politicians. In order to advance their careers, some politicians supported particular kinds of educational reform ranging from new organizational structures, to the open classroom, to whole language, to “back to basics,” to longer school years, to vouchers. This “exaltation of

technique and organization form” (p. 3) often fails and tends to discredit the role of the politician in the educational reform process.

The methodology of this study appears to be well planned and executed. The authors examined educational reform in eleven U.S. cities and collected a great deal of contextual, demographic, and political information about each. They classified these cities as “black-led” (Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and Washington, D.C.) “machine-descendent” (Boston, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis) and “Sunbelt” (Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco). The centerpiece of their research was a series of 516 interviews from three specific groups within each city. These included “general influentials,” “community-based representatives,” and “education specialists.” I was puzzled, however, why they directed readers to “the appendices” for more information about their research design when those appendices were not included in the book (p. 25). They also directed readers to a website that was to provide further information: <http://depts.washington.edu/ampol/urbaned.htm>. Unfortunately, when I accessed this page I received a “404 Error” with the message: “We’re sorry but the page you requested is unavailable.”

Despite these problems of documentation, the authors effectively integrated in-depth community-level analysis into a broader comparative context. They recognized, for example, that the demography, social-economic backgrounds, and political legacies of these eleven cities were very different and that each had different levels of involvement from a variety of educational reform “actors.” (Table 4.1 effectively summarizes these interactions.) These differences clearly had an effect on the success or failure of educational reform initiatives in the past. Nevertheless, they also understood that there were important lessons to be learned by examining the eleven cities as a whole. They conclude that each city has the potential to transcend its structural obstacles to educational reform, noting, for example, that “demography is not destiny” (p. 58).

The authors also provided an excellent summary of the varieties of educational reforms in the past. These initiatives have been either “programmatically” or “institutional”

in form. Programmatic reforms typically focused on changes within the schools and included reforms of the curriculum (whole language, phonics, etc.), teaching methods (team teaching, open classrooms, etc.) professional development (licensure exams, certification requirements, etc.) or adjustments in the school calendar (year round school, longer school years, etc.). Institutional changes, on the other hand, have focused on changes outside the schools and centered on such things as alterations in the administrative structure (such as transferring control from local Boards of Education to a Superintendent), a movement toward “market forces” in the selection of schools (including the creation of private schools that compete for educational funding and voucher systems that allow student “choice” in the selection of their schools) or external testing of students (such as required exams for graduation and annual assessments).

The “problem” with both these general types of reforms, however, is that they typically are “one shot” solutions designed to have an immediate impact. Indeed, our collective desire for a “quick fix” or a simple reform panacea is probably the most destructive policy initiative in education. We demand immediate results and when those results are not achieved, support wanes and a backlash often follows.

What is the answer to this dilemma? Considering the dramatic school reforms that have been proposed and attempted over the years, the authors’ solution seems rather modest. Their key to successful change in education is to build a workable coalition of “local civic capacity” (p. 142) that has enough formal power to initiate and sustain long-term reform. By focusing on the organizational structures of reform rather than presenting a specific solution, they point us toward an important process, rather than a product.

For these authors, “successful action calls for a marathon not a sprint” (p. 168). For too many years, we have exhausted and frustrated ourselves in that sprint and lacked the civic capacity to run the marathon.

If you are looking for the “next big thing” in educational reform, this is not the book for you. But if you are searching for a way to achieve meaningful changes in public education, it may be a good place to start.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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