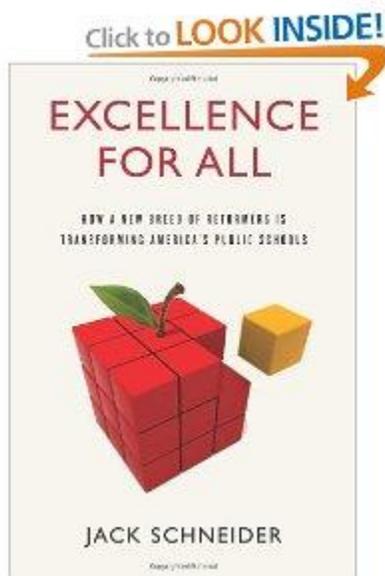


Jack Schneider's “Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers Is Transforming America’s Public Schools” (Vanderbilt University Press, 2012).



Luther Spoehr, a Senior Lecturer at Brown University, teaches about the history of American school reform.

Jack Schneider of Carleton College has written a clear, original, thought-provoking book about three significant strands in the fabric of contemporary school reform: the “small schools” movement, Teach For America, and the Advanced Placement program. In the process, he manages both to emphasize how in his estimation they are improving public schools and to highlight some of the ironies involved in their implementation. Not until his concluding chapter, however, does he really come to grips with their most significant vagaries and limitations.

[Full disclosure: the author and I have exchanged several emails on education-related topics.]

The book's title establishes the book's theme: since the "Nation at Risk" report (1983) warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity," school reformers have tried to find ways not merely to make schools better, but to make them "excellent." Indeed, Schneider terms the past 30 years the "excellence for all era." A more orthodox analyst might have gone with the "Standards-Based Era" or, especially since the 2002 enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the "Accountability Era."

Significantly, NCLB plays only a small role in Schneider's narrative.

"With goals perceived as too modest and too specific, and accountability mechanisms perceived as too strong," Schneider says, "NCLB was frequently viewed in the harshest possible light." While it's not clear to me that having 100% of students achieve some defined level of proficiency by 2014 is a "modest" goal, Schneider rightly notes that opposition to the new regime came from both left and right. But that opposition now seems to be slowing NCLB's momentum—Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who not too long ago announced that 82% of schools were likely to be labeled as "failing," has begun issuing waivers (to 10 states so far) and making exceptions as the fateful year draws ever closer. In many analysts' view, however, NCLB remains the bulldozer in the classroom, driving curriculum and pedagogy before it, so it would have been nice to hear more from Schneider on NCLB.

Schneider focuses on initiatives coming from outside the federal government, often supported by private foundations, not least because of their ability to appeal both to advocates of social efficiency (who want an American workforce that can compete successfully with the Chinese and other economic rivals) and to advocates of social justice (who want to close the achievement gaps associated with race and socioeconomic

status and to open avenues of upward educational mobility). Choosing the “small schools” movement, TFA, and AP as exemplars of these initiatives is a shrewd choice.

Small schools, say the reformers, provide the “right space” for effective schools. The push for them began in the mid-1970s as a reaction against the large, impersonal high schools that had emerged in the previous quarter-century in the name of “comprehensiveness.” Deborah Meier’s Central Park East (CPE)—which started as an elementary school in 1974 and then added a high school—pioneered this approach; a decade later, Ted Sizer and his Coalition of Essential Schools added a strong voice to the chorus; and early in the new century, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation added dollars to the mix—at least for a while (they’ve now moved on to other things). But a problem quickly emerged: not all small schools, no matter how devoted to personalized education and keeping students from “falling through the cracks,” duplicated Meier’s results at CPE. Researchers recognized this early in the game—Schneider wryly summarizes their findings: “Small, in short, was good—except when it was not.” But in a pattern that would be repeated elsewhere in the reform movement, advocates often persuaded funders to proceed full speed ahead, confident that “common sense” showed that their reform was the right one. After all, who doesn’t agree that a warm and fuzzy school is better than a cold, alienating one?

“Common sense” also seems to support founder Wendy Kopp’s advocacy of Teach for America, which aims to put graduates of elite colleges and universities into classrooms with “underserved” students. After all, who doesn’t agree that smart, energetic young teachers are more likely to inspire and educate students than teachers from lesser backgrounds? TFA is the most publicized unconventional pipeline to get uncertified teachers in front of students, and it is undoubtedly the most controversial. Many teachers and their representatives see it as

downright insulting to suggest that a few weeks of summer orientation can make a recent college grad into a successful professional instructor. Moreover, TFA's teachers are committed to the program for only two years, thus guaranteeing continuous teacher turnover in schools already plagued by instability. And while TFA's idealism—"One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education"—is appealing, research again shows mixed results at best. But corporate funders continue to respond to the call of "common sense."

Finally, the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program, which began in the 1950s as a way for some exceptional high school students to take the equivalent of college seminars and earn both credit and placement, has expanded its offerings and its enrollment, all in the name of excellence. From a relatively short list of courses in traditional fields such as U.S. and European history, English literature, calculus, and biology, AP has expanded its list considerably and now offers more than 30 different courses. (To illustrate the growth: in 1982 a little over 40,000 students took the AP US History Exam; last year, over 400,000 did. Overall, in 2001 431,573 high school graduates took at least one AP exam; last year, 903,630 did.) More than half of American high schools now offer AP classes, and the program goes to considerable lengths to include students from disadvantaged schools.

This explosion in enrollment and courses comes at a cost. Schneider quotes a report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute: "AP for all' can quickly become 'truly rigorous courses for none.'" For some years now, as Schneider notes, there have been signs that the AP "brand" isn't what it once was. Some prestigious public schools (such as Scarsdale), as well as many elite independent schools, have announced that they are no longer going to offer AP courses (although many students at these

schools hedge their college-admission bets by continuing to take the exams). Their message: we're too good for AP.

Throughout his brief narrative, Schneider makes telling points about reformers' reliance on "common sense" at the expense of research and about the *de facto* alliance between social justice and social efficiency advocates, and it all comes into focus in his final chapter. Tellingly, he says, "despite the redesign of hundreds of high schools, there was one significant problem: they did not succeed in bringing top-flight education to the traditionally underserved." (The latest AP statistics, out this week, confirm this: in the words of a *Chronicle of Higher Education* summary, "African-American students remain the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms, accounting for 14.7 percent of the 2011 graduating class but only 9 percent of test-takers.") Of course, adds Schneider, "in one sense, the results [of the reform movement] were remarkable. The pursuit of educational excellence for all generated billions of dollars in financial support and the political to push through major efforts across the nation."

Although Schneider looks askance at the "grand rhetoric of excellence for all," he also asserts that "the core vision was coherent and inclusive and exerted a broad influence across the world of education." But to me, at least, it seems a rather disjointed "movement." Small-schoolers, for instance, are often outright antagonistic to Advanced Placement. The late Ted Sizer dismissed it as "fact-stuffing" and, indeed, was skeptical about the utility of standardized testing in general, going so far as to refer to some testing regimes as "child abuse." Advanced Placement advocates are often skeptical about TFA: such inexperienced instructors, they say, are hardly prepared to teach such advanced subjects. In recent years, the AP program has been protecting its "brand" by requiring schools that use it to submit syllabi and teacher resumes to show that

they are offering courses of sufficiently high quality. Can a newly-minted B.A. fill that bill?

Three not-entirely-compatible programs do not a movement make. They are three threads in a fabric that includes dozens of other issues and approaches, some of which might well fit under Schneider's rubric of "excellence." Any school reform nowadays is taking place in a complex environment that can change the nature and chances for "success" of any reform. Education historian Carl Kaestle, in a recent essay on "Federal Education Policy and the Changing National Polity for Education," identified ten different types of organizations that have at least some voice in setting education policy. Foundations, such as the Gates Foundation and others that have sponsored "small schools" and TFA, are important—one of Schneider's signal contributions is to give us some indication of just how important. But there are many other players on the stage, from teachers unions to think tanks to for-profits and beyond. As a result, now more than ever, no reform can be enacted and carried out in its "pure" form—and the definition of "excellence" will continue to be elusive and ever-changing.

Probably no author should be held responsible for his book's subtitle, but whoever came up with this one ("How a New Breed of Reformers Is Transforming America's Public Schools") should be blushing. It may be that Wendy Kopp, with her connections to the corporate America, and even Bill Gates or College Board President Gaston Caperton, constitute a "new breed of reformer." But, as Diane Ravitch points out in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, this hardly means that their entrepreneurial approaches are the answer to educational conundrums. Schneider is right to point out their frequent disregard of research in favor of "common sense," and Gates's willingness to stop advocating small schools when he no longer found them common-sensical leaves many wondering whether being subject to the whims of

private foundations is any better than dealing with the whims of government .

More bothersome is the word “transforming.” Schneider’s account shows that the “movement” has produced some limited changes, no more. But in the subtitle he (or his publisher) falls into a familiar trap: overpromising, then underperforming. Throughout their history, Americans have indulged in and been subjected to the hyperbole of the hustler, the propagandist, and the alarmist--in politics and the marketplace. Over the past 30 years the language of educational analysis has become equally gaseous, inflated to the point of meaninglessness. To save our “nation at risk,” every solution must be “incredible,” “life-changing,” part of a “new paradigm.” When I worked as a history curriculum consultant for a New American Schools project in the 1990s, we were constantly told that we were to be “breaking the mold” and creating “world-class standards,” whatever that meant. Now we are told we can’t merely improve things, we must “transform” them. We must leave no child behind; every child must have a “great teacher.”

It’s good to have lofty goals, but sticking to impossibly high ones leads either to disappointment and cynicism, or to a devious (or perhaps unconscious) redefinition of the standard, so that what used to be considered mediocre is now rated as, yes, “excellent.” After all, “excellence” is relative; it can be recognized only by comparing it to something less than excellent. And it is open to various definitions. As a student, I had at most a very few teachers whom I would define as “great” (and whom other students might have defined differently), but I was lucky enough to have many very good ones, and virtually all of them were at least adequate, and that likely made a big difference. But Bill Gates won’t be moved to open his checkbook, and publishers won’t think your book will sell many copies, if your mantra is “Adequacy for All.”

At the very end of his book, Schneider himself succumbs to the *zeitgeist*: “Whatever its future may be, the aim of excellence for all continues to bestride the world of education reform like a Colossus. Whatever its flaws, it will not fade quietly into history; it will shape it.” Well, okay. But it may be equally appropriate to say that the rhetoric of excellence for all hovers over school reform like an enormous hot-air balloon, blocking the light and making it harder to see what’s really happening on the ground. Happily, for most of his book, Schneider illuminates the shadows and reveals the educational struggle that goes on within the fog of words.