

Fatigued by School Reform: A Book Talk by Jack Jennings

Overview:

In Jack Jennings' new book *Fatigued by School Reform*, he examines the shortcomings of American educational reforms over the past 50 years. He seeks to understand—despite numerous programs and initiatives—why school achievement is not higher and why many middle-aged Americans think public schools are worse today than when they attended school.

Jennings chronicles the four major stages of reform over the past fifty years: equity, standards and tests, accountability, and choice. The quest for equity began in the 1960s and achieved success in inclusion, but it did not result in greater student achievement. In order to achieve this end, the next era of reform focused on implementing standards across schools, but there was not a mechanism in place to hold school districts accountable. No Child Left Behind sought to remedy this issue; however, the program failed to achieve real results. Finally, the choice phase of education reform began in 1992, which sought to provide families more options. Despite their best efforts, charter schools and vouchers have failed to provide significant advantages for similar students. Nonetheless, these programs continue to be championed.

So, what are we doing wrong? In answering this question, Jennings highlights the Coleman Report published by James Coleman in 1966, which investigated discrimination against African Americans in schools. Coleman noted that the two best indicators of child progress in school are the parental background of each student and the quality of teachers. While 50 years of reforms implemented at the federal, state, and local levels have aimed to improve education, they have not affected the parental background of students and teacher quality, and thus have failed to achieve lasting improvements.

To solve this problem, Jennings noted parental engagement must increase in schools. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds particularly benefit from high quality pre-school, afterschool, and summer programs. He acknowledges that the work demands of low-income parents can inhibit such engagement, but he is hopeful about the potential of technology to bridge the gap. With regard to the quality of teachers, he believes governors should upgrade teaching as a profession and raise teachers' salaries to improve retention and quality. Jennings believes that reforms must be well-targeted and well-funded to enhance parental participation and teacher quality to achieve lasting results.

Presenter:

Jack Jennings is the former president and CEO for the Center on Education Policy, a Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan, nonprofit education research organization. From 1967 to 1994, he served as subcommittee staff director and then as a general counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Education and Labor.

This event summary was written by Nicole Chandonnet, AYPF Intern (Summer 2020).