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**In Search of a Broader View of Education Policy:
An Essay Review of Glass's *Fertilizers, Pills, and
Magnetic Strips*¹**

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Glass, Gene V (2008). *Fertilizers, Pills, and Magnetic Strips: The Fate of Public Education in America*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

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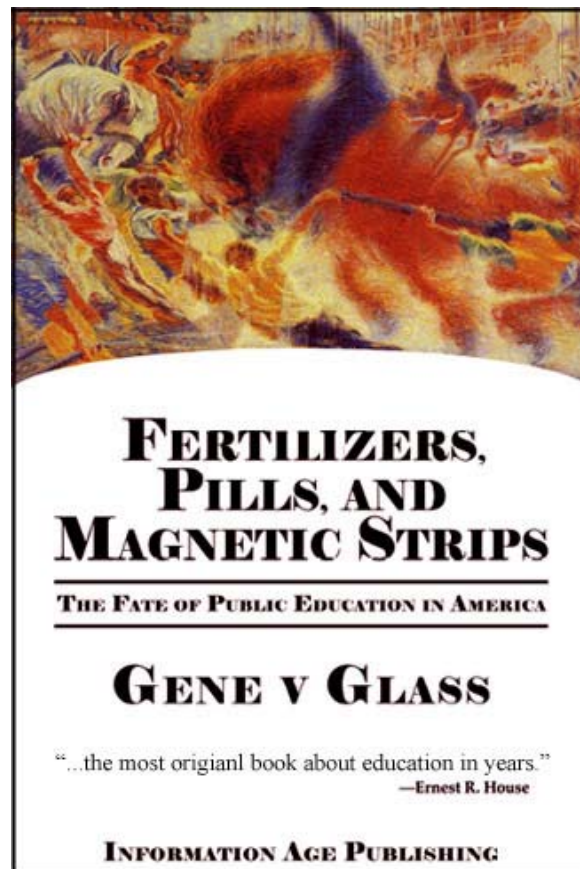
The title of this book will surely perplex many readers, but it has been chosen very deliberately to reflect the breadth of the author's argument that education policy is deeply connected to broader social developments. In this review I situate this book in its author's career, outline the argument made in the book, and conclude with some perspectives on that argument.

¹ This review was solicited, edited, and published under the editorship of Aimee Howley, an Editorial Board member of the *Education Review*.

Gene Glass's contributions to education scholarship are many and highly substantial. Perhaps best known for his work in establishing systematic meta-analysis as an important activity, Glass has been, throughout his career, a trenchant observer of the education scene and an important contributor to education research and scholarship. Throughout his career, Glass has been an innovator both conceptually and practically. He has also had a strong and consistent concern for good public policy in education and for the ways that research can support that goal.

Although I have only met him in person once or twice, I have a long professional association with Gene Glass. I first came into contact with him when he created one of the first on-line discussion lists on education, around 1990. A couple of years later, he founded one of the very first on-line refereed journals, still in operation and known as *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* (<http://epaa.asu.edu>), the first issue of which was released on January 19, 1993.

EPAA broke new ground in education as Glass was among the first to realize the potential of the new technologies for research dissemination. For example, he realized that on-line publication meant that papers could be published as soon as they were ready, that there need be no page limits, that authors could include their data as well as unlimited graphics, and the like. Unlike most of us, who use new technologies to do more or less the same old things, Glass could see that new tools could be used to do entirely new things. In this vein, he also came up with a powerful, though still seldom-copied, editorial approach. After an initial screen of articles submitted, he would send all of those being considered for publication to the entire editorial board—about forty people—asking whoever was interested and available to review them as soon as possible. Typically papers had four to six reviews within a few days, whereupon he would notify the rest of us



that we need not bother with that particular submission. It's a lovely system in which you review when you have time and interest, yet papers get very quick feedback. My own first contribution to *EPAA*, also early in 1993, was submitted, reviewed, revised, resubmitted, re-reviewed and published on-line in less than two weeks—rather better than the two years it often seems to take to have something appear in a print journal!

A man who could come up with so many good practices as well as good ideas, and who has played so many important roles in education research, deserves our admiration, and I've been a fan of Glass ever since, just to make my biases clear.

The second paper published by *EPAA*, also in January, 1993 was by Glass's colleague at Arizona State University, David C. Berliner, and was titled "Educational Reform in an Era of Disinformation," a precursor to Berliner's 1995 book with Bruce Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (New York: Addison—Wesley). Many of the themes that Berliner raised in that paper are reprised in Glass's new book, with the fascinating title, *Fertilizers, Pills, and Magnetic Strips: The Fate of Public Education in America*.



Gene V Glass

In this book Glass takes on the ambitious task of explaining how political, social, economic and technological developments over the last century have brought schooling in the United States to the parlous situation it now occupies. Thus the title, because Glass discusses such intriguing issues—not often found in the education literature—as the impact of improved agricultural technologies and productivity on population migration and family size. He has a chapter on medicine and its impact on demographics through effective birth control and the prolongation of life. He describes the development of credit cards and the subsequent boom in consumer spending and debt, and the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy with its impact on the way people think about efficiency in public services. Education issues, he reminds us,

are not just about education; they “are shaped by powerful economic and demographic forces that have been over a century in the making” (p. 13).

The view developed in the book is a pessimistic one. The central argument is put at the start of Chapter Eight: popular reforms of public education are not about providing better schools; they’re about lower taxes and private privileges. In brief, Glass argues that capitalist economic dynamics, and the political elites and processes to which they give rise, have created a situation in which Americans, especially the powerful, no longer care very much about having a strong, successful and equitable public education system.

The unrelenting pressure—and desire—for Americans to consume, coupled with growing inequalities in income and wealth, has put such demands on family incomes, Glass argues, that people do not want to pay taxes for public services. This is true both of the rich, who object to sharing their wealth, and for the huge numbers of poor, who have none to share. Changing demographics through immigration (legal or not) and birth rates have led to huge increases in the number of minority, especially Hispanic, children in the public schools, further decreasing the motivation of majority whites to pay for a system that is educating, as Glass puts it, ‘brown children’. For reasons outlined in the book, people are, on average, living longer, and the increased proportion and number of seniors in the US are less inclined to support public education as opposed to health care. In these circumstances, many people, and especially the wealthier, seek private advantage rather than the larger public good, with important and undesirable consequences not only for schools but for all public institutions. While these forces have always existed in American life, Glass argues that the trends he outlines are making them stronger.

The purported crisis in American education—a crisis that gets restated every few years in the most dramatic terms—is, in Glass’s view and echoing Berliner (and others), unsupported by the evidence, which he reviews in Chapter 2. US schools, he feels, are as good or better than ever; and the problems they do have, while significant, are largely not of their own making or within their purview to solve. The education crisis is, instead, largely a political device created by elites to justify the kinds of changes they want to make in public education for the reasons noted earlier. These changes, such as vouchers, school choice, charter schools, tax credits, home schooling, and alternative teacher certification, are, Glass argues, intended to promote or create a privatized education system that

will work in the interests of the children of the already advantaged. As one example of the politics around this dynamic, a fascinating chart on page 245 outlines the \$250 million spent from 2002 to 2005 by conservative foundations and think tanks to promote various forms of school choice.

One of the interesting features of this book is that it contains a vast quantity of data drawn from a huge array of sources. It is hard to think of another education book that has charts not only of NAEP and SAT scores, but also of number of farms, birth rates, common drug treatments, credit card debt levels, and personal consumption by economic sector. Statistics of all kinds abound, and even someone who disagreed with Glass's basic argument would learn a great deal from this book about various aspects of American society over the last century.

In later chapters, Glass discusses and critiques many of the nostrums prevalent in American education today, such as choice, charter schools, and the virtues of testing. His critique is telling, especially because it is so well grounded in evidence rather than simply opposition in principle. Many of the examples he cites are from his home state of Arizona, which has advanced a number of these ideas with unappetizing results, such as the increasing racial and economic segregation resulting from charter schools. Another chapter reprises a study by Nichols, Glass and Berliner showing that high stakes testing is concentrated in states with higher minority populations.

In the final section of the book, Glass looks at what might happen next. Unlike many critics of current education policy, who naively call for a "political will" that does not exist, Glass notes that "the people's will is eventually expressed" through politics (p. 232). He also recognizes that things can change rapidly and that, although demographics matter greatly, historical currents can move in unpredictable directions. In the short term he is pessimistic, seeing the likelihood of greater segregation and privatization of education, although he also maintains that he is an optimist (p. 249).

The reader will inevitably put her or his own assessment of education in the United States today up against the gloomy picture Glass paints. Glass is undoubtedly correct in saying that the fate of public education is bound up with larger political and social developments. Here there are many reasons to be pessimistic given the state of the American polity as seen from abroad.

The United States has always struggled with the tension between the roles to be assigned to the private and public sectors, not only in education but in all areas of public policy. It has had, historically, a greater penchant for private sector solutions than have most other wealthy countries. Public education is one of the large public enterprises in the country – which sets the U S dramatically apart from a country like Canada, where health care is also primarily a public endeavor and where many more services generally are public rather than privatized. It is, then, no surprise that much of the policy debate in education in the United States is about efforts to increase the private role, such as those Glass outlines.

At the same time, public education in the US has been enormously resilient. After 20 years of relentless pressure for vouchers, choice, and aid to private schools, public education remains overwhelmingly a universal public service. Charter schools still educate only a relatively small number of students and many of them are run by public entities. Voucher systems remain small and peripheral, and have failed, as Glass notes, to demonstrate improved results for students. The American public continues to give strong support to universal, secular public education.

The larger threat to US education, in my view, is not so much privatization as the highly uneven quality of schools, largely related to community income. The powerful influence of decentralization in US education, an issue Glass does not much discuss, has made it much more difficult for states or the federal government to take the kinds of measures to support greater equity that are found in other countries. In Canada, for example, though there is also a system of local school districts, provincial governments exercise decisive influence through legislation, policy and funding, which makes it possible to develop and adopt powerful improvement initiatives at a large scale. It also means that the inequities in funding and in teacher quality from district to district, or between rich and poor neighbourhoods, are much smaller in Canada, as would also be the case in Europe, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons that student outcomes are also somewhat less inequitable in other countries than they are in the US.

We know quite a bit about how to improve student outcomes (not just confined to test scores, either). It's a matter of quality teaching and quality relationships, of strong community connections, of using evidence to improve practice and policy through steady attention and effort. We have

many examples of school systems that have made significant improvement in student outcomes through this kind of patient and attentive work, and have done so in a way that is supportive and respectful of teachers as well as students and parents. If we could move the public debate away from the latest silver bullet of improvement towards understanding the necessity of unrelenting, persistent effort to improve the daily experience of schooling, we might be able to mitigate some of Glass's pessimism and to create higher levels of public confidence in public education.

All readers, whatever their political views, will find much to stimulate their thinking in this book. Its breadth and scope, the variety of data explored, and the stark nature of the argument will provoke both thought and emotion. As he has done throughout his career, Gene Glass once again helps us think more clearly about important issues in education.

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About the Reviewer

Benjamin Levin is a Professor and Canada Research Chair in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. Ben Levin's career has been in academia and in government. He is a native of Winnipeg who holds a B.A. (Honours) from the University of Manitoba, an Ed.M. from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/ University of Toronto. His career in education extends over many years, starting with his efforts while in high school to organize a city-wide high school students' union and his election as a school trustee in Seven Oaks School Division at the age of 19. Since then he has worked with private research organizations, school divisions,



provincial governments, and national and international agencies, as well as building an academic and research career in education. Ben Levin has held leadership positions in a wide variety of organizations in the public and non-profit sectors. From late 2004 until early 2007, he was Deputy Minister of Education for the Province of Ontario. From 1999 through 2002, he was Deputy Minister of Advanced Education and Deputy Minister of Education, Training and Youth for Manitoba. He is widely known for his work in educational reform, educational change, educational policy and politics. His work has been international in scope, including projects in a dozen countries and with several international agencies.



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