



Sticky School Reform or a New Progressive Era? An Essay Review

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The politics of urban education is a hot topic. After decades of neglect it has emerged as a semi-respectable theme within the *American Political Science Association* and has for some years garnered many coveted panel sessions at the *American Educational Research Association's* annual meeting. Like most politics in the U.S. there are ideological camps. One camp argues that the politics of urban education are irrevocably captured by special interests, most especially the education professions who are seen as the most powerful groups influencing our locally governed, overly democratic, public schools (Moe, 2005). For this camp, the remedy requires new a governance structure overseen

by a strong executive—who does not owe favors to unions—and accompanied by market competition to spur innovation and create consumer choice (Ouchi & Segal, 2003). The other camp argues that urban schools are fiscally and educationally under-resourced given the needs of the students in them (Rothstein, 2004). Because this creates poor outcomes, public schools are repeatedly subjected to self-interested policy entrepreneurs whose reform plans prove to be little more than reflections of their material self interest (Molnar, 1996). This camp argues for more and better-targeted school resources, but also for social programs and subsidies to improve the well being of families and communities.

The two books reviewed here take different positions. Each is refreshingly distinct in its explanation of the failed reforms of the past. Both aim to provoke a keener understanding of the changes needed for substantive improvement by crossing boundaries that hem in the conventional analyses of the competing ideological camps. And their differences make for a useful argument about big changes and incremental developments. In short, they place us squarely in the realm of contemporary education policy and politics.

Charles Payne’s book-length essay, *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, tackles the timeworn problem: Why do so many well-resourced and conceptually sophisticated school reforms fail to meet their substantive goals when they are implemented in urban schools? Unlike many writers on the topic, Payne does not focus on the reforms themselves. He does not parse their merits nor present evidence that one or another has a better track record. On the contrary, he concedes reformers’ good intentions and creative thinking. He focuses instead upon the problematic implementation of reform. Although reformers cite manifest problems to justify change, Payne says they do not fully appreciate that “failure in the inner city is overdetermined” (p. 47).

An equal opportunity critic of such shortsightedness, Payne finds fault in both the market-oriented structuralists, whom he otherwise appreciates for their insistence on centralized authority, and with hopeful “progressives” who believe that all reform

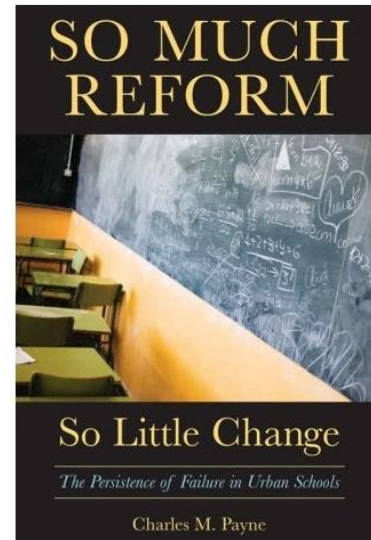
About the Authors

Charles M. Payne is the Frank P. Hixon Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, where he is also an affiliate of the Urban Education Institute.

Charles Kerchner is a research professor in the School of Educational Studies at the Claremont Graduate University. Currently he is studying institutional change in public education. He and his colleagues have spent much of the last five years examining efforts to reform the Los Angeles Unified School District, and in their minds what is happening in Los Angeles is an apt case example for changes taking place in the entire institution of public education.

“must be non-coercive.” He calls the progressive’s insistence on volunteerism “nonsense” given his diagnosis that “bottom-tier” schools are “irrational” organizations (p. 77). Organizational irrationality, he asserts, thwarts all reforms equally—charters, vouchers and merit pay as surely as curricular innovation, new technologies and more money.

Here is where Payne parts company with the extreme camps on both sides of the political spectrum. Their explanations for poor urban schools are based on rational arguments about failure. As Larry Cuban put it nearly two decades ago, “Those who believe in rational approaches to organizing change would argue that if policymakers only asked tough questions, thought through issues analytically, examined their beliefs, or avoided playing the politics of the problems while carefully using available research findings, school reforms would not keep returning like bad pennies” (Cuban, 1990 p. 6). We would do well, he argued, to look past such rational explanations, and focus instead on the larger social functions that schools serve in our peculiar democracy. Cuban proposed two alternative explanations for repeated reforms that fail to take: Reforms may tap into irreducible value conflicts that can only be managed for the time being but not resolved permanently, ensuring that the conflicts will inevitably be revisited again. Alternatively, it may be that urban education’s bureaucratic coordination and control mechanisms are only loosely coupled to the core work of teaching and learning, ensuring that little reform will penetrate into the classroom, hence leaving the core problems untouched.



Payne offers a different, psychologically-based and equally non-rational explanation: all reformers greatly overestimate the ability of structural and procedural change to inspire deeply demoralized, habitually and willfully cantankerous urban educators, who in his words “yield neither to evidence nor experience” (p. 63). In such schools, teachers who “meet the highest standards of the profession are held up for ridicule” (p. 22). To his practiced eye, these professionals mistrust one another, are insecure to the point of neurosis, lack the basic resources necessary to do their

assigned tasks, and therefore become cynical about the prospects of improvement. This toxic climate creates fertile ground for competing factions within schools. In urban schools the factions are often racialized. New programs, even the well-designed ones, quickly become racially coded too. Education leaders, in consequence, lack legitimacy because they must take responsibility for these failures and for the school climate that exacerbates them. So leaders tend to react with autocratic behavior and by sustaining what they already know to be a pathologically inappropriate bureaucracy.

Payne doesn't ignore the rationalists' concerns about dysfunctional bureaucracies; rather he addresses his attention to bureaucrats' motivations. For example, he is especially appalled by the way that bureaucracies encourage ordinarily ethical people to bracket their moral outrage while at work, focusing them on narrow cost-benefit calculations, and instilling the reflexive habit of avoiding pejorative connotations, offering instead neutral descriptions that are often logically impenetrable. And he reminds us that David Rogers taught a generation of scholars how high-level decision-makers are separated from the consequences of their actions through such bureaucracies, and hence, separated from formal accountability (Rogers, 1967).

In one group of the stories by which he presents his argument, Payne explores teachers' exceptionally harsh judgments of Black and Latino children's prospects and potential. The chapter is entitled "Sympathy, knowledge and truth" and is about the micro-politics of race. His aim is to help us understand that minority teachers can hold stereotypes as often as others, but that they typically connect race to social location. "It would be naive to think these judgments are not racially inflected, but they are not racism in any simple sense of the term; they are not saying the race to which these kids belong cannot learn...Negative judgments are formed by place, not race. These particular kids, with these particular parents, living in this particular neighborhood, going to this particular crazy school, can't expect to amount to much, but the fault is in their circumstances, not their genes." This is a racialized reaction to an untenable situation that he simply labels "skepticism" (p. 79). He claims skepticism is so common that "in bottom-tier schools low expectations are part of the culture of the institution" (p. 74). He seems to say that teachers too, are caught up in the particular circumstances of place, and fend off judgments based on their students' performance because they remain uncertain, as do most educators, about how to improve it. As a first step, Payne calls for counter-intuitive measures that would reduce the vulnerability of those working in inner city schools, rather than stiffen the consequences they face.

Payne's use of the terms "inner city" and "bottom-tier schools" recalls the debates over desegregating Chicago's schools in the 1960s. Robert Havighurst, also a University of Chicago professor in his time, had been asked to conduct the school

survey required by an Illinois state law aiming to document the differences between Chicago's Black and white schools. Influenced by the then-popular socio-geography of cities, Havighurst grouped Chicago's schools by the socio-economic status of the surrounding neighborhood and discovered that "inner city" schools, the lowest of four status groups he created, accounted for 53% of the elementary schools and one third of the high schools, most in Black neighborhoods. These schools received large numbers of inexperienced, uncertified (often Black) teachers and had high principal turnover (Havighurst, 1964). Performance data, revealed for the first time in his studies, also correlated highly with race. On nearly every measure "white schools" fared better than "black schools," and "high status" schools better than "inner city" schools (p. 337).

Not surprisingly, Havighurst's conclusion was heavily influenced by his categorizing scheme. "Inner city" schools lacked the resources that "high status" schools could take for granted in their neighborhoods. He extracted from this a complex politics of racial interdependence, and proposed an equally complex remedy. Chicago must aim to keep and attract middle-income residents, while maintaining a "substantial white majority" in the central city (p. 374). He judged racial integration to be a "failure" and anticipated the argument that the political scientist, Paul Peterson would make more than a decade later: Cities have few choices when it comes to education policy, they must do all they can to attract those who pay the taxes that maintain public services. Redistribution of educational resources to the have-nots is a recipe for urban decay (Peterson, 1981). If Havighurst (and Peterson) are correct, what might politicians actually do? Havighurst's clear preference was for the "urban community school" idea, in which inner city schools were to be saturated with compensatory services that aid low-income Black students but are also designed to be attractive to the white middle class; a task requiring enormous resources.¹

My detour through Chicago's segregation history is not arbitrary. Payne seems intent on revisiting the problems that preoccupied academics decades ago, but to different effect. It is from such mid-century roots, Payne seems to say, that progressives began focusing on improving schools to such an extent that everyone—middle class and low-income, Black and white alike—would voluntarily choose them for their children, or as preferred places of work. Then too, his substantive points are

¹ Chicago's recently built and fabulously expensive, selective high schools have proved Havighurst half right. They did attract the white middle class, although that fact has not helped the Black children of those who never left the city; they make up only a tiny fraction of such schools' enrollment (Karp, 2007).

mostly buttressed by research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), and his data often comes from that city.² He describes, for example, ethnographic research by Betsann Smith and colleagues on instructional pacing in Chicago schools and the work led by Fred Neumann, both of which conclude that Black students lack the opportunities to learn challenging material that more privileged students can expect. Instead, they are subject to repetition that demoralizes them and their teachers (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Smith, Smith, & Bryk, 1998).

By way of solutions, and just in time for this reader who was becoming a persuaded skeptic herself, Payne suggests we aim *big*. By this he does not mean systemic reform or “going to scale” (Elmore, 1996; O’Day & Smith, 1993). Rather, he wants changes that “produce large increments of learning for large groups of urban kids in a fairly short period of time” (p. 93). His concrete suggestions also come from CCSR’s dictum to balance academic “press” with social support. Together the two are said to work synergistically to generate “a style of work, a more intensive and robust way of intervening” in children’s learning (p. 46). He is advocating for big changes, one small step at a time. Such ideas are unlikely to attract policy makers’ attention, however, for although they would constitute large departures from most classroom practice in the schools he describes, they are too incremental for most reformers’ tastes.

Payne seems to realize this problem as well, chastising reformers for being willing to declare that just about anything—whether untested, counter-intuitive, or even going against the grain of well-established findings—is bound to be better than what exists today in urban schools. This is the mantra of the radical reforming policy entrepreneur, more enamored by the innovativeness of his or her ideas than by assuring their usefulness to the ordinary human beings charged with improving children’s schooling. If one radical reform ultimately proves no better than the last, the political cycles can repeat themselves, or the pendulum will eventually swing back (Cuban, 1990). In the meantime, there is always the bureaucracy to blame.

So familiar is this story that we have all come to expect rhetoric about the next “bold experiment,” the next “promising model,” or the next educational “transformation.” Payne refers to this rhetorical entrepreneurialism as a “degraded civic culture” in which policy makers have forgotten that “even in the worst systems there are some things that should be built upon, not jettisoned without examination” (p. 147). He puts reformers’ excesses down to idealistic impulses, but also to

² Full disclosure: I once worked for CCSR.

opportunism, political chicanery, and occasionally, “garden variety racism” (p.148). And as political scientist John Kingdon realized decades ago, when politicians feel they are responding to a crisis, they are willing to take otherwise unthinkable public policy risks (Kingdon, 1995). Skillful policy entrepreneurs lie in wait for such windows of opportunity, which allow them to attach their favored solutions to whatever problems are boiling over. Everyone gets to *act*, even if little gets done.

Charles Kerchner, David Menefee-Libey, Laura Steen Mulfinger and Stephanie Clayton have much to say about this state of affairs in their political history of school reform in Los Angeles, *Learning from L.A.* While Charles Payne writes in the best tradition of the observer—assembling vignettes from an assortment of studies situated in many cities while continuously returning to Chicago—Kerchner and collaborators conduct place-based research that digs deep into the context of one city in search of broad patterns. Although both volumes judge urban education in America to be dysfunctional, the authors’ approach and recommendations could not be more different. Where Payne sees repeated failure by reformers to look past their ideological blinders and suggests deeper scrutiny into the psychological pathologies that urban education currently nurtures, Kerchner and colleagues point to a broader trend of institutional change that has already begun, notwithstanding the failures of any individual reform program.

Kerchner and colleagues re-contextualize a pair of system-wide reform efforts initiated by more or less broad civic coalitions in Los Angeles over the 1990s. Each went by a predictably evocative acronym, sought school-based change, advocated substantial decentralization, and had been dubbed a failure by the early 21st Century. LEARN was overlaid by LAAMP and each was threatened by voucher and system break-up initiatives, both of which also failed to garner public support. All were followed by the top-down and insider-initiated governance reforms of mayoral control and non-traditional superintendents. Although decidedly more upbeat about the prospects for



the future than Payne, Kerchner and colleagues do not claim that any of these reforms increased student performance in more than a handful of schools, nor do they present evidence that the system is currently better managed, or provides a higher quality of teaching and support services than in the past. And they present a wealth of evidence suggesting implementation problems have undercut all reforms. The evidence presented to make this case is familiar and similar in its outlines to Payne's.

But here is where the similarities end. Kerchner and colleagues' historical perspective permits taking the position that contemporary reformers' implementation mistakes began with the organizations, governance structures, and performance expectations that were institutionalized during the Progressive era. Their survival into the 21st Century is dysfunctional, if understandable. This is essentially a different non-rational argument about path dependency. Political scientist, Paul Pierson, one of the argument's most accessible advocates, argues that historical timing, the sequencing of events, and the dynamics of self-reinforcing behavior explain the reproduction of patterned solutions that can preclude consideration of other alternatives better adapted to current problems (Pierson, 2004).

Patterned solutions make reform attempts "sticky." Reformers repeat strategies that were innovative at an earlier moment, but are not designed to meet current problems. This happens partly because successive generations of politicians and bureaucrats, like the rest of us, filter information to fit their preconceptions and stick to known strategies perceived to be low risk (Hannon & Freeman, 1989). The very complexity of education—its multiple goals and conflicting constituent demands—has the counter-intuitive effect of reinforcing, rather than undermining these known solution sets (Jones & Bachelor, 1993). Reformers therefore find it convenient to adopt the rhetoric of known reform strategies, justifying their claims for radical improvement by the ways that they intend to take advantage of contemporary technology. In the end, however, they do not challenge the basic structure of the system and consequently cannot fundamentally alter the key relationships between the adults who work in schools (Shipps, 2005).

Given such over-determined circumstances, another historical institutionalist, Mark Blyth, asks how change actually occurs. His study of economic policy change leads him to conclude that causal ideas, more than new structures or stronger incentives, reduce uncertainty so that politicians and bureaucrats are more willing to adopt otherwise risky institutional change. Ideas also provide the impetus for the coalitions and collective action needed to bolster politicians' resolve (Blyth, 2002). Kerchner and colleagues agree with both Pierson and Blyth. LAUSD's bureaucrats and educators, they argue, have been conceptually stuck in Progressive era ways of thinking, and those patterns have held back even the best of the new ideas. Their

solution? Recognizing that these blinders limit choices can free us to take them off. Only then can new ideas be systematically organized to compete with legitimated and rationally coherent, if unproductive, patterned solutions.

In particular, Kerchner and colleagues claim that “LEARN, like public education generally, accepted the notion that public education possessed sufficient power to address the ills of society and that it should be blamed if social ills continued” (p. 50). This, they argue, is one example of residue from the Progressive era. Unlike the advocates of privatization or system-wide breakup with whom they competed for funding and attention, the grassroots coalition behind LEARN did not think the school system broken; it simply needed renewed attention, re-organization and new governance. Their confidence in the system came from mid-century memories of fine schools with better-than-average performance, and from the district’s commendable track record of having kept up with growth in the sprawling city.

In other words, LEARN reformers were blinded by the past. They saw the changing demographics—Los Angeles was fast heading towards a majority Latino school system—but did not realize how it would shift the politics of school governance. White Angelinos tended to use their “exit” option to leave for the suburbs or other states when confronted with disappointing schools. Between 1970 and 2000 nearly three million Anglos left the basin. Latinos’ lower economic status—poverty rates rose from 50% in the 1970s to 75% by the 1990s—gave them fewer exit options; they chose to “voice” their objections (Herschman, 1970). As in other cities, notably Chicago, the protests began with student walkouts in the 1960s.

But choosing to stay and fight for better schools is not the same as being heard. Latinos were unrepresented on the school board until 1993, a disenfranchisement that was reinforced by voters who refused to pass school construction bonds after 1966, thereby halting the district’s ability to keep up with enrollment growth, one of its signature accomplishments until then. The fiscal screws were further tightened when California’s *Proposition 13* capped property tax rates in 1978, just a few years after the state’s Supreme Court mandated more equal funding across districts. Although not precisely what Paul Peterson had predicted for urban districts, the state was left with little choice but to distribute school funding centrally, further frustrating Angelinos who wanted more resources to improve their schools. This well-known fiscal bind is only type of evidence given for the “hollowing out” of the district’s capacity to meet its educational obligations, to set future priorities, or to reassign the interest group-supported categorical aid that skews the state’s funding formulas. In sum, Kerchner and colleagues assert, “The district began to realize that it could not solve the problems it had been handed” (p. 83). The blinders were taken off.

There is another Kingdon-like explanation of change: There is a social and economic transformation of the district accompanied by delegitimation in the face of decreasing district autonomy. Both create a sense of crisis, opening a window of opportunity for policy change in the early 1990s. A political coalition of business and foundations, the teachers union, and a segment of grassroots groups comes together behind the need for change, but lacks clear goals. Ideas about how to improve schools that have been floating around for some time are brought to the table by various policy entrepreneurs—liberal businessman Richard Riordan, State Assembly Speaker Pro-Temp Michael Roos, and UTLA President Helen Bernstein—each of whom manages to tie his or her favorites to some perceived problems. The outcome is a reform agenda both familiar in terms of its core ideas, and ambitious in that its implementation asked adults to shift their behavior and relationships in unfamiliar ways, and because it did not automatically provide the resources to succeed at the newly assigned tasks. As Payne might add, this created a breeding ground for insecurity and mistrust that can eventually turn to cynicism about the prospects of improvement.

Two support strategies provided by reformers were also in philosophical conflict: William Ouchi, a UCLA business professor and champion of the multidivisional corporation, teamed with Richard Riordan to promote managerial entrepreneurialism by principals as the core strength of the decentralization efforts. Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert, both professors at Stanford University, envisioned heightened teacher professionalism to be at the core of any sustained devolution of authority. Principals were sent to corporate-like training in Palm Springs to increase their managerial skills, while teachers were asked to work across schools with one another to develop professional norms that might control their work. This very old Progressive era debate—managerialism vs. professionalism—made it difficult to expand the experiments taking place in different schools to district scale (Shipp, 2006).

But, if being stuck in early 20th Century ways of thinking is the underlying problem facing L.A. reformers, Kerchner and colleagues argue along with Mark Blyth that such a causal idea, when properly understood by the participants, will clarify a great deal of uncertainty and reduce the sense of “permanent crisis” that has overtaken the city in the past two decades. Moreover, the repetition of some patterned solutions to this old conflict can bear the seeds of larger institutional shifts. Under the right circumstances, Kerchner and colleagues believe that we can create a *new* Progressive era.

One of their most captivating insights is that patterned reforms of the 1990s also constitute “auditions” of ideas that had been percolating for decades about how to restructure the system. These ideas include universal high standards, decentralization

and greater grassroots engagement, and more variety and choice in schooling. None of them, Kerchner and colleagues assert, are simply remnants of Progressive era policy solutions. Instead, they are incomplete solutions, as yet unsystematically organized: No one knows how to implement universal standards, but it does reframe notions of equity inherited from the early years of the 20th Century when improving equity simply meant improving access. Decentralization involves an unknown combination of tight state control over standards (and their measurement) with local school control over the means of meeting those standards, again quite different from the Progressive era legacy of standardized practice and decentralized governance. Interest in greater parent and community involvement combined with choice, turns on its head generations of activists' efforts to enhance their political influence through protest.

These ideas were being auditioned in small experiments walled off from the school system by special charter laws or in isolated, but activist LEARN and LAAMP schools. They were often described in mundane terminology: shared decision making in schools, universal pre-school, increased teacher professional development, small class sizes, and large discretionary budgets, none of which seemed to be more than an incremental shift in highly patterned solutions. But they developed distinct logics in the process of being enacted, as reformers and school level practitioners learned to think differently about what they were attempting. These ideas percolated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but could not gain traction without community support and legitimacy greater than that which could be provided through LEARN and LAAMP. Kerchner and colleagues think the ideas need greater legitimacy. They would create it by constructing a new Progressive era program of school reorganization that rests on an inverted Progressive era logic, a program that is systematically structured and whole, a *textbook* for reform.

Channeling Edward P. Cubberley (Cubberley, 1916), the early 20th Century progressive who wrote the textbook credited with describing the ideal system of public education for his era, Kerchner and colleagues prescribe five distinctive legal and structural changes for our own. They seek a legal statute that decentralizes authority to individual schools (or self-affiliating groups of schools) to encourage would-be protesters to become political entrepreneurs. Student-based financing is wanted to ensure that students, rather than bureaucrats, are the targets of fiscal policy. Positive incentives like free higher education, rather than sanctions punishing poor performance, are their preferred means to motivate students who fail to see education as a long-term investment. Likewise, teachers should be paid for the skills they have acquired, not for the test scores produced, since the latter discourages working with challenging students. To eliminate some of the perverse incentives that pit union and district officials against one another, they prescribe a mandate for collective bargaining:

Legislate student standards and the means to produce them as a required bargaining topic. They would democratize the politics of education by enabling two-way communication and information between parents and schools, direct access to open-source curriculum and exam-based graduation, all by taking advantage of web-based technological developments. Finally, they call for legislation to design “novel and focused” schools, because they realize that the inequity in choice is largely a function of supply limitations, not demand (p. 239). If you are not exhilarated by this list of structural changes, you probably have not been closely following the reform debates of the past two decades. If anything, Kerchner and colleagues are too modest. It is hard to see their innovative recommendations as unproblematic “lessons” from Los Angeles.

Payne also believes that we have learned something from the past—his metaphor is the learning-disabled and draws mainly on mid-century examples—but he lacks the patience that Kerchner and colleagues have for a long time horizon. Payne’s learning is targeted primarily to the majority of contemporary progressives, those who would otherwise appear to be caught in a reflexive embrace of gradualism and voluntary change. In his penultimate chapter, Payne admonishes them to stop relying on gradualism and acknowledge that it is simply impractical to wait for everyone to be won over. Some coercion is probably needed to broaden the reach of any positive intervention. Progressives not only must admit that teachers need clear direction, but also that the poor are at least partly to blame for their own educational outcomes, even if they have good reasons for lassitude. He admits to knowing of no demonstrable turnaround that has been attributed to changes in parenting, but suspects that parental support is nevertheless required to establish the stability any incremental reform effort requires.

Together these two books make complementary non-rational arguments about reform. While Payne stresses the limitations of urban school people and inner city environments that inhibit change, Kerchner and colleagues focus on how ideas influence the politics of reform. Payne is seeking a fundamental change in the *culture* of schools. He wants to persuade, coerce if necessary, urban educators to adopt practical techniques that are complex and high yield, but also socially affirming, while simultaneously requiring parents to live up to social obligations they have heretofore ignored. Kerchner and colleagues point out that fundamental change in the *structure* of urban schooling is already being auditioned, and has begun to change expectations and reduce some policymakers’ uncertainty about what to do. We need now, they assert, a neo-Progressive politics of education to enable the institutionalization of some promising reform strategies. Payne would add that expectations about schooling

possibilities are not all that needs shifting, so too do expectations about what children can do despite their circumstances.

Their styles are distinct, but each is brilliantly argued in its own right. I was captivated by Professor Payne's stories, by their clear-eyed, sharp-tongued boldness and by their resonance with my own experience as a reform watcher. More compelling still is Payne's artful use of language to convey his feelings and to influence yours. One particularly arresting metaphor is odor. I counted no fewer than three times in which body odor of some type stands for poor educational judgment. I was less enamored of his lists of impediments, barriers, models, and characteristics. For their part, Kerchner and colleagues have arranged the welter of detail needed to tell the Los Angeles story to make it more than usually accessible, although it is their uncommon historical institutionalism and audacious call to action that sets them apart from other narratives about urban education.

Read both, assign them to your students, and let the debates begin.

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