



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

September 1, 2010

ISSN 1094-5296

Fischel, William A. (2009) *Making the Grade*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pp. xi +298

ISBN-13 978-0-226-25130-1

Reviewed by Dana M. Lebental
Loyola Marymount University

William A Fischel is currently an Economics Professor at Dartmouth College. After graduating from Amherst College and receiving his PhD from Princeton University he has become a specialist in local government. He has published several books on local government including “The Economics of Zoning Laws,” “Regulatory Taking,” and “The Homeowners Hypothesis.”

In *Making the Grade*, William A. Fischel breaks down into key parts including the school calendar, school district consolidation, geography of school districts and social capital and looks at educational finance in America from an angle that is rarely addressed. Readers will find themselves asking similar questions, and wanting more as to why the education system has been arranged the way it is. This historical review emphasizes that the organizational aspect of education needs to be looked at by scholars and

Citation: Lebenthal, Dana M. (2010 September 1) Review of *Making the Grade* by William A. Fischel. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev969.pdf>

educators. From one-room schoolhouses to charter schools in California, Fischel tries to get to the heart of questions that need to be asked about education finance in this country.

The current school system is governed locally so it “can facilitate mobility and systematic reform without sacrificing self-governance” (p. ix). This reform is in response to the diversity and mobility of the nation and is a correction to his first book, which states “home voters were in charge and did not care much about the difference between school boards and city council when buying their home and then participation in local affairs” (p. x).

Chapter 1. Introduction: Mobility, Property and Community

Fischel looks at the transformation from one-room schoolhouses to school districts from the eye of the resident voter or homebuyer. The value of a house can increase 10-20% depending on the school district it falls in. The move to school districts became important due to the increased demand of workers, because worker skills were taught primarily in the high schools. With the increased demand for high schools, came the increase demand for teachers and schools that were specialized. This forced schools to be similar to each other and transition into age grading curriculum instead of the original, level based curriculum. The author argues that the school calendar begins at the end of summer and ends at the end of spring for the transition and mobility of families. The one-room schools did not have start or end dates since the curriculum did not require continuous education. This change from one-room schoolhouses to school districts occurred around 1900, which was when America was moving towards urban communities.

Chapter 2. Early American Land Policies and the Marvelously Efficient One-Room School

The overarching theme of the book is the relationship between schools and property values. At one point Fischel states, “I will show that the system of local schools in the

states admitted to the union during the nineteenth century was shaped by a desire to maximize saleable property values” (p. 15). As an incentive, companies such as the Ohio Company would promise public infrastructures such as roads, churches and schools for families to move and purchase their land. Schools were again used as an incentive to lure pioneers west (Land Act of 1785) and were required to be built in each new town to ensure that citizens were taught religion, morality and knowledge.

Chapter 3. Explaining the School District Consolidation Movement

Road improvements and school busses made it possible for rural children in the twentieth-century to attend larger schools and high schools. Larger schools were created for two main reasons. First, the commission of education offered money for every one-room school that consolidated with a graded district. Each one-room school was its own district, so when it merged with graded districts, it decreased the amount of districts in the area. The transition from one-room schools to larger schools was very difficult and did not happen over night. During this transition, there was a shift in job description for teachers as well as standards that started to emerge. Second, the decline in farm populations, led to a decrease in school enrollment. Although the student teacher ratio was 50:1, if there were fewer than 50 students enrolled, there were not enough resources to retain the teacher. Unfortunately, the political control of education and community identification was soon to be lost with this consolidation, because students were now being transported greater distances for an education. The schools, primarily high schools, that emerged were to fit the needs of the “community,” which is why the schools became an economic engine for the communities. Schools that were improving communities increased the property value of the community and attracted more people.

Chapter 4. “Will I see you in September?” Labor Mobility and the Standard School Calendar

There are four main explanations why schools have the summers off. First, movement is cheaper during the summer. Parents who worked on the farms needed to be at harvest locations in the fall, so the summer was the perfect time to move. Second, it is easier to heat a building than to cool it. The third reason was to mimic universities and colleges who followed the international norm of school beginning at the end of summer. Last, schools are off in the summer so schools can be interchangeable. When students moved, they would be able to be placed in a classroom the following year and not have to be behind or relearn old material. However, in the twentieth century only some of this reasoning still applies. There is a big push for schools to operate in the summer for two main reasons. With an increase in population, and lack of capital, building more schools is not beneficial. Year round schooling would save communities money because it would utilize the same capital it has been using and allow for an increase in student population.

Chapter 5. The Economic Geography of School Districts

The size of school districts was based on three assumptions. Before the Civil War, education was different in the South because black slaves received no education. Further, prior to the Civil War, plantation owners did not want to pay for the public expenditures of education. Since the white population density was very low in the South compared to the North, there was no uniformity in the education. The school districts were formed to give white students a minimum student population. The author notes that when using Google Earth, you can see the overlay between school districts and city municipal districts that have emerged since the Civil War. Today, the schools districts competitiveness is still based on on land rather than population which is interesting since the size of school districts is based upon three assumptions. The three assumptions are that resident-voters consented to consolidation, voters preferred smaller districts and wanted to run K-12 schools and third, it is impossible to break up age-graded schools when populations grow, which allows for the schools to handle the increase in student population seamlessly.

Chapter 6. Education Reforms and Social Capital in School Districts

Fischel asks the question, are school districts still relevant in American life. “Schooling is probably the most used example of a local public good, but economists who reflect on it concede that it fits poorly into their technical definition of public goods” (p. 219). The two arguments given for public schools are the spillover effect in which other people will benefit from your education and the defect in the capital market which allows for students to borrow against their future. Fischel concludes that both of these options require national financing of education not local or state financing.

Making the Grade contributes to the field of education by analyzing historical events through a fiscal lens. This book can be of use to Doctoral or Masters students in the field of education and business, to obtain a background in education finance and a non-typical explanation of how the current education system has been established. I appreciate Fischel efforts to explain the system, and ability to propose answers to deep-layered educational issues. This book left me asking questions about the possibilities for equity and social justice in American schools.

The goal of this book was to answer two questions: why do Americans govern schools at the local level, and why do schools start at the end of summer? Fischel answered both of these questions, and left me asking more questions.

About the Reviewer

Dana Lebental is a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She earned her Masters degree in Administration from Pepperdine University and her BA in Political Science at California State University, Long Beach. She has worked as a special specialist as well a chemistry teacher in Los Angeles. Her current research interests include goal setting in K-12, accreditation and educational finance.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author,
who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
<http://edrev.asu.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
