



Hess, F. M. (2017). *Letters to a young education reformer*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

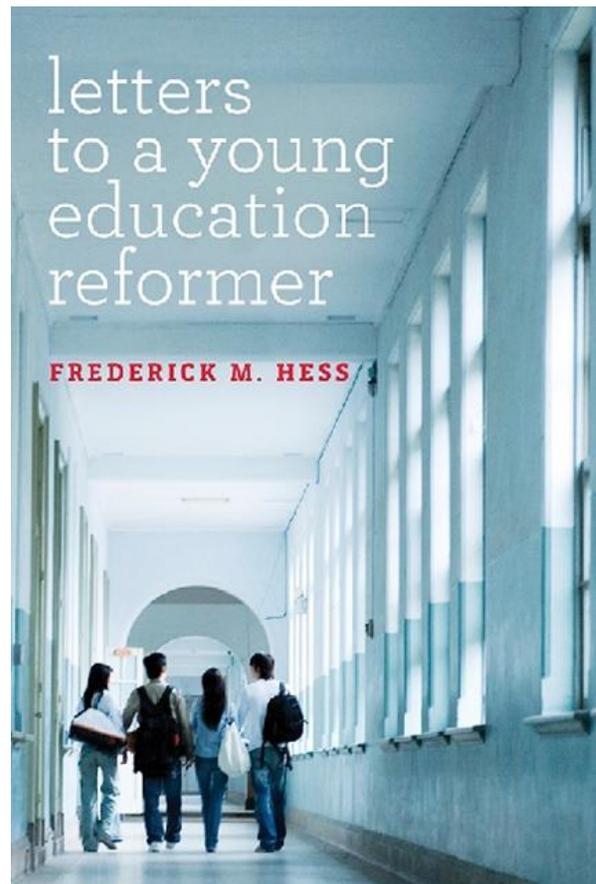
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Letters to a Young Education Reformer is a highly readable book filled with sage advice based on Fredrick Hess' reflections from his highly influential 25-year career in academia and education policy. Hess wrote the book to "share some advice on how to think about school reform" so that others may benefit from his "missteps, frustrations, and realizations" (p. xv). With a sense of humility, and even self-depreciation, Hess acknowledges making his "share of mistakes," which, he assures the reader early on, will provide plenty of content for the reflections that follow.

The book is structured as a collection of two types of short, wide-ranging chapters. The first type addresses education reform issues such as school choice, "ed tech," and common core. These issue-oriented chapters are ambitious. In the space of no more 10 pages, Hess summarizes some of the most complex, controversial and vexing issues in education reform and provides a personal commentary on each. For example, Hess boils down one of his earlier books on the history of the American education system to a



digestible “ninety second” version (Hess, 2010). Thus, the reader looking for extensive references or a comprehensive review of the research will not find it here. Rather than a comprehensive treatment of each topic, Hess approaches these major education reform issues in a conversational tone, colored with personal experiences and perspectives.

The second type of chapter focuses on working in the field of education policy. These chapters, sprinkled throughout the book, are advice-laden and more practical in nature. They address career-oriented subjects such as interacting with foundations, dealing with the media, and even a discussion of how parenthood shaped the author’s view of education reform. Again, the reader is treated to perspectives, not prescriptions.

Hess’s conversation with the reader is where the book is at its best. Throughout, Hess moves away from the research to chat with the reader about his personal viewpoints and insights. Clarity, directness, and a biting sense of humor (that has ruffled many feathers in the past), characteristics of Hess’ writing broadly, are all on display in this book. This approachable view of his successes, failures and lessons learned invited me kick up my feet and read the book more like a work of fiction than policy.

The reader should not conclude from the tone of the book, however, that it is light on content. To the contrary, Hess provides some useful frameworks for future education reformers to better understand their work. He articulates the disjoint between do’ers and talkers to explain how wave after wave of policies have met the same ill fate, evoking frustrations among all involved along the way. I found common ground in his distinction between big “R” reform as a set of policies versus little “r” reform as a set of principles. And the chapter on “the perils of passion” is a thoughtful contribution to any future study of education policy. He articulates the paradox as this: passion is necessary to get “big stuff

done” (p. 143), yet how its very intensity distorts our vision (p. 144) such that the deep devotion to enact a policy may blind the architects to an objective assessment of its impact.

The book is like sitting down with Hess “to pick his brain.” As a junior scholar, I relished those rare interactions with the senior scholars that I admired when they reflected on their own careers. As an associate professor, I learned from personal reflections, such as those found in the Acquired Wisdom series (<http://edrev.asu.edu/index.php/ER>), instructive to gaining a foothold on how to build a meaningful career of my own. For those seeking a similar perspective as they begin their journey, or for those looking to set their careers in a new direction, *Letters* is a worthwhile addition to your exploration.

Ultimately, I believe that Hess wrote the book to elicit a reaction from the reader. I will oblige. While I can no longer count myself among the throng of young education reformers, like Hess I believe that youth in an academic setting is more about the willingness to take on new experiences and advance new ideas than age. So, I engaged with the book in light of my own professional and academic experiences.

Personally, I wish that Hess would have provided a greater recognition that, given his success, he is breathing rare air and a discussion of his path to get there. He is able to criticize foundation executives, experts and the education reform complex that advances big “R” reforms because he has been invited to the table – a lot. Most academics and reforms get very few, if any, opportunities to be at the table. And he waits until page 151 of 152 to admit that he has not been “an especially nice guy” along the way, an important admission that would help his characterization of the book as “tough love for school reform” to ring more genuine.

Hess has been to the top of the education reform mountain, taken in the view,

and has come back down to tell the rest of us that it's not all that it's cracked up to be. I apply the same critique for other high-profile academics, such as Diane Ravitch, who build a career advancing specific set of education policies and then a second career critiquing those same policies (Ravitch, 2016). For those who aspire to climb that same mountain and partake of the view for themselves, how does Hess' advice help them ascend to similar heights? In today's politically-charged education environment, where Hess' voice has contributed to tone of the debate, can the young reformer ascend to similar heights in education by talking *to* people with whom they disagree and forging friendships, as Hess suggests?

Likewise, Hess' experiences may be so far removed from those closest to schools that they may be unable to identify with his stories. To a principal or teacher, the book is essentially fictional because it will take intense imagination to consider what it may be like to have the Pentagon seek your advice in a secret meeting, foreign dignitaries to hang on your words and to cause such a stir with your pen

that it warrants media attention. What should those educators closest to schools take away from Hess' advice?

The text did evoke a reflection on my experiences as I considered my own set of *Letters* for those interested in forging a career that straddles policy, research and politics. I believe that wherever your place in the education system we each live by our own collection of *Letters*. Teachers, principals and politicians alike can all point to formative experiences and stories that shape how they view education and approach their work. In some ways, it would be easier to find common ground and move education forward if we all made our *Letters* explicit.

Lastly, I find the timing of this book of interest. Hess is a prolific writer and a guy who generates ideas a mile a minute. He's not done by a long shot. He has many years and many more contributions ahead of him. At the end of the book, I was left with the thought of grabbing a cup of coffee, or better yet, a beer, and asking Hess how these experiences will shape what he does next. Or, more importantly, *how* he does it.

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About the Reviewer

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