



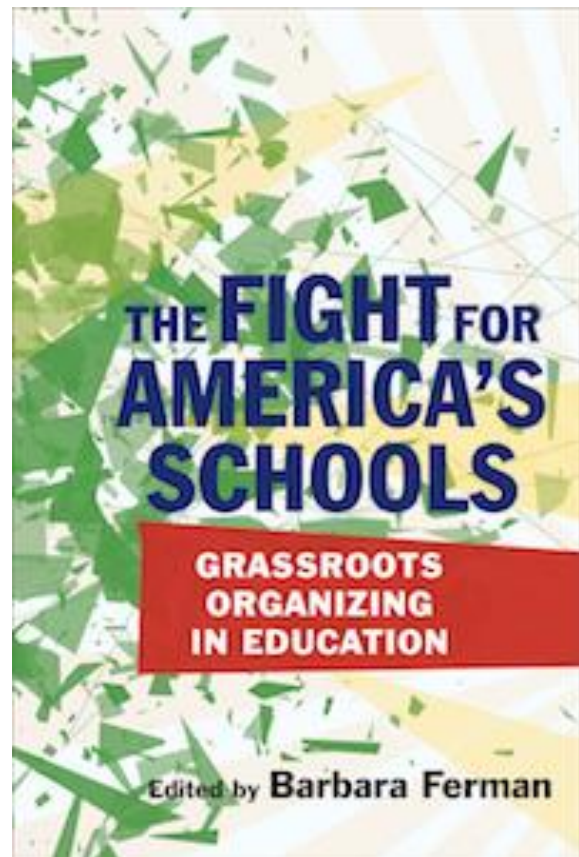
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In the midst of proposed federal budget cuts to public education in the summer of 2017, U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren tweeted: “I proudly stand with teachers to send a message to @realDonaldTrump and Education Secretary @BetsyDeVos: NO cuts to public education” (SenWarren, 2017). A gesture of solidarity with public school teachers, Senator Warren’s tweet signifies the “new politics of education” (p. 3) that editor Barbara Ferman explores in *The Fight for America’s Schools: Grassroots Organizing in Education*, a compilation of case studies that examine grassroots organizing efforts for the preservation of public education as a collective good in the face of market-based reforms. Ferman positions the “new politics of education” as a battlefield between two camps—the “logic of market efficiency” that advocates school choice and private sector influence in school funding and governance, and the “logic of democratic responsiveness” that lauds education as a collective good for a



functional democracy (p. 132). Focused on cases in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the four case studies center on different aspects of localized efforts to combat market-driven education reforms to tackle the book's core questions guiding the new politics of education: "who makes education policy, in whose interests, and for what purposes" (p. 3).

Primarily written for researchers and educators in higher education, the book addresses these questions by assessing the context and challenges facing grassroots organizing for public education and highlighting strategies for coalition-building and organizing campaigns. In this way, *The Fight for America's Schools* makes key contributions to the study of public engagement in education policy by amplifying the voices of constituents most impacted by public education policy—teachers, students, and parents—and offering strategic approaches to combating market-driven educational reforms. Throughout, *The Fight for America's Schools* maintains a hopeful perspective for the power of public engagement through grassroots organizing, and argues that "an effective challenge to the market-based reform agenda will require these groups [direct constituents of public education] to work together" (p. 10).

Ferman's introduction and the following two contributions by Ferman and Nicholas Palazzolo, and Stephen Danley and Julia Sass Rubin, respectively, outline the need for allied grassroots groups to combat market-driven reform policies and the challenges that such policies present to the construction of these alliances. Authors underscore that overcoming racial distrust, resource imbalances, and divisive messaging are foremost among these challenges, as proponents of market-driven reforms have capitalized upon historical divides and a coherent rhetoric of public institutions in perpetual crisis in order to carve inroads at the local, state, and federal policymaking levels. "Challengers," the authors advise, "need to

identify cracks in the ecosystem of the market-based education reform movement and be prepared to seize the opportunity for alignment" (pp. 31-32). However, the studies present a narrow geographical context of challenges limited to New Jersey and Philadelphia, and lack a thorough exploration of the disproportionate impacts and racial disenfranchisement of market-based reforms on communities of color.

Other scholars have highlighted how cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana, and Detroit, Michigan represent quintessential cases of market-driven reforms for charter expansion that have seized upon civil calamity for market gains (e.g., Buras, 2015; Jabbar, 2015). While these two cities exemplify critical cases of charter implementation models, the northeastern cities in *The Fight for America's Schools* present a more nuanced story of how market-based reforms infiltrated communities' public school systems over time with the help of politicians and private interest groups. In a comparison study of Newark and Camden, NJ, for instance, relationships between sympathetic elected officials and deep-pocketed private donors presupposed impending urban collapse in order to advance political agendas for market-based educational reforms, thereby developing a toxic atmosphere for grassroots organizing without experiencing citywide disasters. Despite a bleak view on the severity of challenges confronting public engagement, these challenges are presented alongside tools for grassroots groups. Authors emphasize the importance of a strong local community infrastructure that can leverage a community's social and economic capital, along with residents' personal networks and the press, to combat market-driven reform strategies that target disjointed communities to diminish the momentum of local resistance.

The subsequent case studies elevate grassroots organizing as an effective tactic to achieve political victories for public education. Authors Elaine Simon, Rand Quinn, Marissa

Martino Golden, and Jody C. Cohen offer an illustrative example of the inter-organizational coalitions and grassroots mobilization needed to not only successfully combat market-driven reforms, but to provide a “counternarrative to the dominant one of pro-market reformers” to ensure that “the voices of diverse parents, teachers, and community members are heard” (p. 73). The authors trace the coalition-building process of three Philadelphia organizations that differed in their membership, composition structure, broader issue platforms, and organizing strategies, yet shared a similar perspective for equity in public education. Through their joint efforts, the three groups successfully produced relevant research, advocated for state legislation supporting public education, and made “education a priority in gubernatorial, mayoral, and city council races” with the coalition’s supported candidates winning all electoral seats (p. 72). According to their case studies, community groups overcame historical challenges of grassroots organizing through collective interests for education, and in doing so, redefined the narrative of who makes education policy and for whom.

Barbara Ferman furthers the discussion of organizing strategies with a case study focused on shared educational concerns that serve as unifying platforms for different parent groups to organize across the city of Philadelphia and its suburbs. In this case, high-stakes testing presented a uniquely shared issue of concern that mobilized urban and suburban parent groups alike through the growing opt-out movement. Although Ferman presents a successful case of grassroots organizing and mobilizing strategies, her study only superficially examines the differential implications of high-stakes testing on racially segregated schools. Though a shared concern, high-stakes testing holds differential punishments for communities based on race, socioeconomic status, and geography, with urban parents of color having a lot more to lose than affluent, majority White parents in

the suburbs (Au, 2010; Trujillo, 2013; Valenzuela, 2005). While helpful in understanding how common personal concerns can become motivators for political involvement, this study falls short of elucidating precisely how diverse parent groups construct a coalition to address shared concerns when the stakes of the game are differentially weighted by race, ethnicity, and class.

The final and strongest case study, contributed by Julia Sass Rubin on a New Jersey suburban advocacy group called “Save Our Schools New Jersey” (SOSNJ), takes a deeper dive into how broad base coalition-building can be utilized as an asset to organizing rather than a barrier. Her presentation of the case study synthesizes lessons from the preceding accounts in its analysis of how SOSNJ leveraged its diverse membership of inner-city and suburban parents to expand social media recruitment techniques, personal networks, and participation in a larger coalition to help “keep the organization focused on issues that impact the entire state” rather than solely localized issues (p. 114) and gain statewide influence in the New Jersey legislature. Sass Rubin’s study drives home the book’s argument that multi-level and multi-angle strategies for organizing define the “new politics of education,” just as market-driven reforms appear at the local, state, and federal levels. This case’s discussion of parent group outreach strategies, organizing objectives, and political power proffers hope for grassroots organizing as a force within the new educational politics.

Authors Susan DeJarnett and Barbara Ferman close with a comparison of the dominating “logic of market efficiency” against the renewed logic guiding grassroots organizing for public education, a “logic of democratic responsiveness,” which arguably is the original intent of the universal public education system (Dewey, 1916/2011). Although the preceding case studies describe organizing efforts over specific policy changes

to public education, DeJarnett and Ferman conclude that much more stands to be lost in the battle between logics than school buildings and test days. The two opposing logics compete to define the purpose of education itself—as a consumer good in a market of choice, or as a community good to uphold civic capacity in a democracy. To this end, the authors concur that only widespread grassroots organizing and coalitions with political power, electoral sway, and powerful counternarratives can push against the market-driven forces that seek to undermine education as a collective good.

*The Fight for America's Schools* presents an encouraging, albeit slightly myopic, view of a turning tide in public education reform. While scholars have long articulated the harms of neoliberal reforms and market-based rhetoric that characterize debates over public education, the work of Ferman and the contributing authors in New Jersey and Pennsylvania brings an alternative narrative to life by reframing and reclaiming old debates through a “logic of democratic responsiveness.” While this reframing is undoubtedly a step in the right direction for advocates of public education, this book situates it within a narrow scope of specific market-driven reforms without due regard to the range of different challenges facing urban, suburban, and rural communities, and lacks a thorough racial analysis of the impacts of reforms and opportunities for resistance (see, e.g., Buras, 2015). The pervasive influence of marketization through other public domains, such as undermined labor protections, healthcare, regressive tax policies, and the increasing costs of higher education poses

serious questions for waging a full counterattack on a “logic of market efficiency” for one of democratic responsiveness (Au & Ferrare, 2015). Ironically, the text’s academic tone privileging an audience of researchers and university educators counteracts its own call to grow collaborative grassroots coalitions across educational institutions, and perhaps further silos the study of the success of grassroots organizing within the realm of academia rather than within reach of teachers, parents, and students.

Nevertheless, *The Fight for America's Schools* offers several key takeaways for researchers and educators working in public education politics, reform, and advocacy. First, the case studies spotlight grassroots objectives and strategies that resulted in tangible victories for public schools. In a time of rapid news cycles, focused goals for policy victories are highly important for readers interested in systemic change. Second, amplifying the voices of parents, teachers, students, and local groups—the direct constituents of public education—brings the fight over public education to the grassroots level from the national policy sphere of private education reformers. The foremost contribution of this volume, however, is a thorough mapping of the “new politics of education.” Ferman and contributing authors effectively map this new political landscape to encourage a new direction and a new game plan for public education advocacy. This is a useful and accessible text for educators, researchers, and policymakers keen on navigating the crossroads of education debates toward a new landscape, logic, and narrative of American K-12 public education reform.

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