



Hess, F. M., & McShane, M. Q. (Eds.). (2018). *Bush-Obama school reform: Lessons learned*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

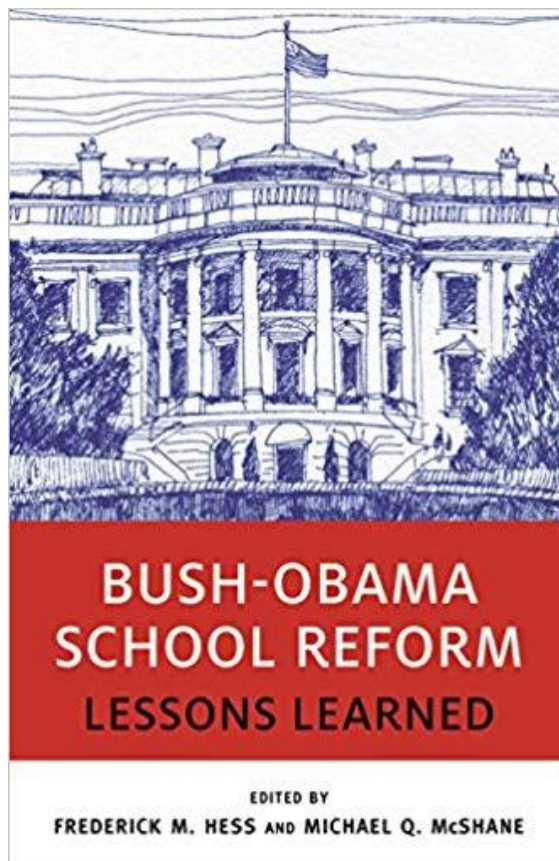
Pp. 248

ISBN: 978-1682532171

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The dash between presidents “Bush” and “Obama” is an intriguing character in the title of Fredrick Hess and Michael McShane’s edited book, *Bush-Obama School Reform: Lessons Learned*. My interest was sparked by the editors’ decision to connect the education policies of two very different presidential administrations under one combined label, suggesting a continuous policy stream.

By way of context, the editors note that as the Bush administration came to a close, the cracks in the bipartisan No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act had appeared, as indicated by broadly negative public opinion of NCLB as a “poisoned brand” (p. 2). Yet, Obama, described as a “charismatic young icon” who “gave Democrats a chance to lead the parade,” chose to follow NCLB with a “post-Bush reset on school reform” (p. 2) that also ultimately lost its luster. This point, between the two presidential administrations, is where the book holds the most potential to make sense of what seemed to many educators as almost two decades of uninterrupted federal education



policies that were in many ways two sides of the same coin.

Hess and McShane set the stage for a thoughtful analysis of this era by broaching the tough questions about whether the Bush-Obama combined efforts were “slipshod policymaking” or a “gutsy commitment to putting students first?” They warn readers that the answers are “complex and perhaps unsatisfying” (p. 3). As I invested myself in the chapters, I looked forward to learning how the authors would frame, analyze, and connect the specific policies of each president into a coherent whole. Otherwise, the book could easily be titled something more mundane like, *Federal Education Policy from 2000-2016: Lessons Learned*.

The editors enlist an impressive and diverse list of authors for the task, including voices from traditional academia and policy research centers such as the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CPRE) and EdChoice. Collectively, the authors address the major policy issues that spanned each presidential administration such as testing and accountability (Deven Carlson), school turnaround (Ashley Jochim), and teacher quality (Matthew A. Kraft). These chapters are informative for anyone interested in learning how our nation arrived at the present state of federal education policy and what the journey portends for the future. Of the expected policy topics that the authors address, the stand-alone chapter by Tom Loveless on how academic standards produce weak reform is incomplete without a discussion of assessments that dictate learning outcomes and accountability policies that determine the consequences and rewards of adhering to academic standards. One would expect standards-based reform alone, without testing and accountability, to be a weak reform tool.

There are also chapters on some less publicized policy issues like research and innovation, and the demands placed on state

education agencies (SEAs) during these turbulent years. I found it particularly insightful that the editors treated “Incentives and Inducements” as a distinct policy issue. This chapter, written by Patrick McGuinn, is pivotal because it details the policy levers that each administration employed to convince states to embrace federal education goals, despite the lack of constitutional authority over education. Bush, through aggressive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets and a “bottom-line” approach to student achievement, placed unrealistic expectations on American public schools. Under NCLB accountability targets, 82% of public schools were in jeopardy of failing to meet federal expectations by 2011 while suffering a lengthy list of unintended consequences, from cheating scandals to curriculum narrowing, in its wake. The Obama administration used waivers to not only relieve the pressure mounted up from NCLB but also to advance their own policy objectives. McGuinn chronicles Obama’s creative use of financial incentives via the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grants to convince 46 states to enact sweeping reforms that expanded charter schools, adopted common academic standards, and revamped teacher accountability, all while providing funding to only 12 states in the first two rounds of RTTT.

All of the chapters follow a similar structure, bringing a sense of cohesion to the book. Each chapter presents a brief historical overview of the issue, followed by a discussion of the policies under Bush’s NCLB act, then a treatment of the policies under Obama’s RTTT, before the authors’ turn their attention to the lessons learned from both administrations. I read through the NCLB sections rather quickly and looked for new insights in the sections on the Obama-era policies. The impact of NCLB and a discussion of Obama’s education policies have been addressed elsewhere by many others, including the co-editors themselves (Hess & Finn, 2008; Hess & Petrilli, 2007; Maranto &

McShane, 2012). The book provides a succinct and solid review of the education policies of each presidential administration. And the authors draw a number of common-sense lessons from the chapters to guide federal education policy in the future: there will be inevitable pushback facing top-down policies; local dynamics will mitigate federal directives to promote buy-in and facilitate implementation; capacity must be built at all levels; fallout will result from demanding too much, too quickly.

The account is gripping at the points in each chapter where the authors discussed the transition between the two presidential administrations. This is new ground. What challenges and opportunities remained from Bush's NCLB era? What was the Obama administration's rationale for (mostly) continuing in the same direction in education policy rather than changing course? For example, charter schools are a controversial policy issue that spanned both administrations. In this case, the dash in Bush–Obama is warranted. Bush and Obama both advocated school choice policies. Bush's support of charter schools is a natural extension of a Republican education philosophy predicated on freedom of choice, local control, and a contempt for school district governance structure. Obama's embrace of charter schools, however, is a thorny fit. Yet Anna J. Egalite, in her treatment of charter schooling under both presidents, provides little context for Obama's decision to forge ahead with the implementation of many school choice policies that his Republican predecessors had promoted. With RTTT as a powerful incentive, the Obama administration effectively removed charter school caps in all but four states and expanded chartering authority by allowing school districts to establish their own charter schools. Obama's promotion of school choice created a political rift with consequences that resonate even today as the Democratic party has struggled to find its footing on school choice because its

transcendent president advanced pillars of the Republican education agenda.

There is a common catalyst in the plot that is mentioned by almost every author and deserves special treatment in assessing the lessons learned from this era of unprecedented federal expansion in education. The authors portray the 2008 Great Recession as the “shock” that provided Obama with the opportunity to carry out his agenda. The \$4.53 billion RTTT competitive grant program was made possible by including it in the larger American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the Obama's administration's response to the Great Recession. The magnitude of the Great Recession and its role as an exogenous force during the Obama administration cannot be overstated. Pianta and Hofkens provide some context with a subsection on how the economic downturn adversely impacted family conditions through large-scale unemployment, stressed schools through staff and salary reductions, and constrained student learning opportunities. The importance that the authors collectively place on the Great Recession brings to mind comparisons to other galvanizing external events such as Sputnik and *A Nation at Risk*. It also begs the question about another key lesson learned from the Bush-Obama era: To what extent is an external shock necessary to advance sweeping federal policy? The editors, however, provide only a cursory treatment of the Great Recession in the closing chapter concluding with the equivocal advice that, “times of scarcity may be a good opportunity to get states, cities, and school districts to embrace new initiatives, but they also create challenges for follow-through and execution” (p. 193).

There is also a key protagonist in the advancement of Bush-era reforms during the Obama administration who deserves more consideration. The appointment of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education was an early signal of the path the Obama administration

would follow. Duncan, described as a “reform firebrand” (p. 38) from his tenure as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, was a central figure in shaping Obama’s education policies. Ashley Jochim, one of the few authors to connect Duncan’s work in Chicago with his approach in DC, describes Duncan as a reformer cut from the Bush-reform cloth. With respect to school turnaround policies, Duncan closed 60 schools and reopened many others under new leadership in Chicago based on the philosophy that “low performing schools are largely staffed by ineffective teachers and leaders” (p. 40). Duncan expanded these policies nationally by requiring low performing schools to replace administrators and teachers, adopt evaluation systems based on growth in student assessment scores, convert to charter schools or reopen under an education management organization (EMO), or close entirely.

While the book remains centered on policy, the political aftermath of Obama’s adoption of traditionally Republican education policies effectively cemented these reforms in the Democratic party as centrist policy positions. By extending many of the Bush-era policies, Obama supplied political cover for “reform Democrats” to create Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), launched in 2007, to support policies such as accountability and school choice.

Full disclosure here: I have direct experience with the tensions created by this split in the Democratic party. As the Democratic candidate for Arizona governor in 2018, I attempted to reshape the public discussion toward “public school choice” to connect the public school constituencies with the popular school choice movement. This attenuated position, particularly in the Democratic primary, allowed my opponents to spin my position as “anti-public schools,” a

charge that my campaign spent considerable time and energy refuting. Similarly, for Democratic candidates for other offices, such as Corey Booker, an association with DFER has prompted headlines in progressive circles like, “Corey Booker Hates Public Schools” (Blanc, 2019), prompting Booker to navigate the tightrope of Democratic education policy by clarifying that he would “prioritize public schools” if elected president (Herreria, 2019), while also embracing public charter schools if they are “equitable and inclusive, and play by the same rules as other public schools” (Booker, 2019, p. 27). From a policy perspective, attempting to justify the place of traditionally Republican policies as pillars of a Democratic education agenda has diverted time and energy away from establishing uniquely Democratic policy positions.

The editors conclude that “For all the different agendas and personalities, though, we were struck in crafting this volume at just how comfortable the contributors were with the notion that ‘Bush-Obama school reform’ was something of a unified whole” (p. 185). And, “Yet, for good or ill, the consensus among the contributors seems to be that the No Child Left Behind era set the table for Obama’s efforts, and that the Obama years largely build on what Bush had done” (p. 185).

I was left with more questions, however. How unprecedented was the “comfort” between the two presidential administrations? Was it a singular experience forged by an extraordinary external economic event or a function of the actors at the time where, in either case, little precedent was established for the possibility of future education policies that span otherwise contrasting presidential administrations? Or, should we expect a follow up book titled, *Obama-Trump School Reform?*

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