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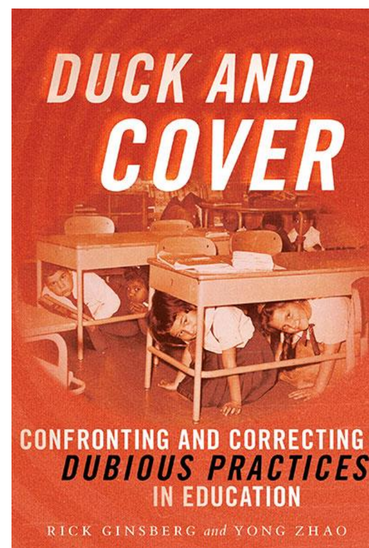

Lost Opportunity: Ineffective School Reform in the USA

Change in U.S. public schools is problematic. In media, the intransigence of teachers unions is a trope; and for educators, the arbitrariness of policy-making is a parallel lament. For teachers facing mandated change, vocation and livelihood are in the balance; while for public figures in politics and media, publicity and wedge issues abound. So a dance emerges. Resistance to meaningful school reform is balanced by a constant flow of cosmetic policy fixes. Occasionally, life in classrooms is profoundly altered, but with consequences that are as often destructive as they are beneficial. Through it all, there is a lack of ongoing evaluation and the new normal becomes entrenched regardless of its outcomes. This educational landscape is the territory of *Duck and Cover* by Rick Ginsberg, Dean, and Yong Zhao, Foundation Distinguished Professor, at the University of Kansas School of Education and Human Sciences.

Throughout the volume, among 17 chapters and case studies, the authors apply the metaphor "duck and cover" to elicit a faddish and futile school response to the nuclear threat of the 1950s. These attempts at progress have in common their lack of a research basis, their utility in gaining publicity or political capital, their lack of follow-up evaluation, and their longevity in place, long after any purpose has been served. Time and again, the authors

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make these points forcefully as they document the folly of "dreams, fantasies, and nightmares" imposed on classrooms in areas like readiness, social-emotional learning, and educational technology. Another section of *Duck and Cover* analyzes "operational bugaboos" that are perennial sources of controversy in school life, such as professional development, dress codes, teacher evaluation and gifted programs. The book closes by discussing "systemic and analytic conundrums" all educators are familiar with, among them high stakes testing, teacher pay and career progression, school board composition and effectiveness, and the rise of meta-analysis. The authors make trenchant arguments against familiar "reforms" and implementation processes. They document unintended consequences, waste, superficiality, lack of consultation, and performativity as characteristics of the change process. Through it all there is a tendency to cling to the familiar—good or bad—that slows renewal and similarly keeps even bad ideas in place.

What are some of those bad ideas that stubbornly stay in place? According to the authors, the list is long. The essays on kindergarten and college and career readiness emphasize the variability of our students and the presumption of many reformers that they can meaningfully generalize about individuals. This theme recurs throughout the volume on topics like exceptionality, dress codes, teacher evaluation, and high stakes testing. Education's commitment to individual flourishing is regularly tested against the system's need for order and efficiency. Too often "one size" is made to fit all. A particularly pernicious example is the narrowing of not only the curriculum, but of conceptions of student ability and possibility. A familiar example is the over-emphasis on baccalaureate degrees and the diminishment of entrepreneurship, talent, and the trades as pathways to careers.

The "dangerous fantasy" of panacea thinking is another theme of *Duck and Cover*. Within schools we are led to believe that "silver bullets" can jump-start reform with the speed and effectiveness of an mRNA COVID vaccine. Would that it were so. Educational technology illustrates this fraught idealism from the early days of Sydney Pressey's teaching machines in the 1920s to computer-assisted learning, MOOCS, Zoom, and, possibly, AI today. The "reading wars" is another tale of competing panaceas. Beyond the classroom, however, at system, state, and federal levels, magical thinking has more damaging consequences. High stakes testing and school ranking threaten the neighborhood school and demoralize school communities. Arbitrary teacher evaluation systems, especially value-added models tied to compensation or shaming, motivate teachers to transfer from low SES schools, teach "to the bubble," and narrow the curriculum. These same policies have driven some school personnel to outright fraud—an instance of Campbell's Law (1979) in operation.[1]

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[1] "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (Campbell, 1979, p. 83).

Finally, the careless use of meta-analysis by John Hattie and others in the application of research to education is a dangerous panacea playing out in current academic and policy circles. The authors document several hazards in bringing this technique from more conventionally scientific fields to education. These problems emerge, in part, because of a lack of randomized studies in education and the highly variable effects of interventions on individual students. Most damning, perhaps, is that in general, "Meta-analysis does not help identify the impact of interventions on other outcomes" (p. 145).

Duck and Cover documents these sad and unnecessary consequences. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top initiatives, along with *A Nation at Risk,* have directed the limited funds available to renew schools in directions arguably now shown to be counter-productive. These politicized interventions are characterized by empty promises made by unqualified authorities. There was no Dr. Anthony Fauci attempting a professional voice of reason because, in the vast majority of cases, those with political authority over public schools lack such credentials or a vocational motive. Even the donor relationship that teachers unions have with the Democratic Party has not led to pedagogically informed policy.

Duck and Cover also treats as a theme the disposition in the United States to address poverty through cosmetic efforts at education reform. In the chapter on the achievement gap, the authors offer clarity on this claim:

> To underscore the point, a devastating reality is that economic inequality in the United States is a core part of the dilemma causing the achievement gap. In terms of income inequality, for example, the United States is among the most unequal countries in the world. (p. 37)

As educators have painfully come to know, poverty and near poverty haunt a significant minority of our students and impact their lives in ways schools cannot remedy. Ginsberg and Zhao remind us that schools are only one part of the ecosystem necessary for children to thrive. Sadly, it has been impossible to mobilize a comprehensive response to childhood poverty. Relatively cheap and non-threatening school reform gimmickry, however, has been a clever political response by countless "education" governors and presidents. As a result, this very appellation has been drained of meaning, discredited, and abandoned.

On a positive note, Ginsberg and Zhao close each chapter with their "'3 Rs—Reconsider, Remove, Replace," which describe their ideas of positive futures for public education. Just as *Duck and Cover* is a useful overview of wrongheaded reforms in our schools, the authors' brief recommendations for meaningful reform often reflect the best of current research. The "3 Rs" section of the chapter, "How Teachers are Paid," for example, is a fresh look at career ladders and the diversification of roles in teaching. Beyond each teacher's classroom itself, the talents and insights of veteran, master teachers are underused resources in our school systems. Under the current system there is little way for those with the greatest expertise in teaching locally to

propagate the best of their work among their colleagues down the hall. This is a valuable opportunity lost.

By the way, consider an alternative to the binary merit pay choice we are regularly offered, that is, merit pay for all or not at all. On one hand, merit pay is divisive and challenging to implement with fairness. On the other, the status quo of automatic annual salary steps frustrates good teachers and principals who are aware of a few malingerers. A balanced approach could be annual steps for more than 90% of staff, but frozen salaries for those few who are identified as clearly not meeting professional standards. The argument runs that merit pay raises are not worth their damage to community solidarity, and correspondingly, that rewarding with automatic pay increases those few who are clearly ineffective and negligent is beyond frustrating. Merit pay may be unnecessary, but a bit of "demerit pay" could be most helpful.

Likewise, in the chapter on school governance, Ginsberg and Zhao describe a model school board design that invites policy makers' attention. Elected board members are joined by others appointed by organizations and the local political authorities, as well as by teachers and—non-voting—student members. Citizen control of schools is an important tradition, but it does not follow that blanket authority should be ceded to boards that can be composed entirely without the voting influence of relevant academic training and professionalism. This is a kind of extremism in the design of school boards that renders informed policy making more difficult.

In one case, Ginsberg and Zhao may fall victim to the kind of thinking they generally decry. In the chapter on foreign-language instruction, we are offered the premises that (a) foreign languages are best taught at an early age; (b) the USA does not practice this approach; and (c) this highly valuable type of learning is, therefore, poorly delivered. The usual comparisons to the language facility found in other countries are used as evidence. The chapter contradicts themes the authors have effectively made repeatedly throughout the book, as follows: This putative reform is recommended in a one size fits all manner and with students in forced compliance. In the authors' words, "…require foreign-language instruction for all children as a basic part of their [elementary] education" (p. 58). There are important considerations *Duck and Cover* does not present: Is such a mandated curriculum sensitive to the challenges many students are having in reaching literacy in standard American English? Might the nations with multiple language facility be in contexts where these languages are used day to day in people's lives? Could facility in foreign language learning, especially listening and speaking, share qualities with fields like music and athletics, which are more reasonably pursued in depth by those who choose to do so in elective fashion? Might simultaneous translation by smart phones soon provide universal language access for all? If we value transfer of knowledge goals such as international understanding, knowledge of the world at large, awareness of the human condition, and the contributions of ethnic minorities (p. 54), wouldn't we be best served by

teaching such concepts directly in social studies, rather than hoping they leach through the study of basic skills in one new language? In this chapter the authors promote a panacea of their own.

Some other observations may help the reader approach *Duck and Cover*. Ginsberg and Zhao imply, but do not focus on, the theme of top-down management of our schools. As an illustration, to start at the "highest" level, Canada has insisted on disallowing a federal Ministry of Education to deal with K-12 education. Education is jealously guarded as a provincial responsibility. After half a century of experimentation with a Department of Education in the United States, it could be argued that the amplified federal presence has been of questionable benefit. Or to use another model from Canada, in health care, the federal share of funding is about 25% and this comes to the provinces with a few conditions, for example, that each plan serve all people with no fees and that it be publicly administered. This approach is relevant because it moves more accountability closer to where services and taxation are done. In education, our default could be that the further government authority is from the delivery of services, the more requirements should be based on broad principle. The frustrated reforms of U.S. schooling repeatedly show that micromanagement of a large national institution is often futile and frequently counterproductive. Canada has developed adequate feedback systems to keep improving its public healthcare, even though there is much autonomy in the system. International comparisons in K-12 education also show Canada as a success story relative to other diverse nations. In the US, the federal and state authorities might create more effective change if they focused on broad principles and implemented on the ground systems of summative evaluation.

At this point the pesky issue of school and teacher performance enters the discussion. This theme is embedded in all discussions of reform. The consensus lately has been that only high stakes standardized testing offers the data we need in judging schools. It is worth considering, however, that the accreditation regimes that have been developed and to some degree abandoned or made *pro forma* deserve another look. Evaluation of a complex, subjective act like teaching has never become a hard science, although it does lend itself to mixed methods evaluation by others with expertise. Accreditation systems have been deemphasized when they should have been reformed. Simple fixes could restore effective design to the process: (a) make improvement continuous through targeted annual formative visits rather than routine memoranda to the file; (b) retain master teachers and administrators as *limited term* visitors so they can share their current expertise; (c) replace punitive processes with developmental ones; and (d) challenge lingering, existing reform efforts to prove their worth.

Duck and Cover illustrates the potential of school reform while documenting the frailties of past efforts at change. Yes, schools are somewhat intransigent, resistant to change, but often this has been a survival instinct

since educators were faced with wrong-headed, even unjust, panaceas externally imposed by Washington, DC and statehouses. Bureaucratic structure and its authorities as well as the public and media have become hide-bound by traditional conceptions of how school should be conducted. There have been revolutions in American public education before, as personified by the careers of Horace Mann and John Dewey. It could happen again. The stars align. Heroic leaders emerge. Fundamental renewal is possible.

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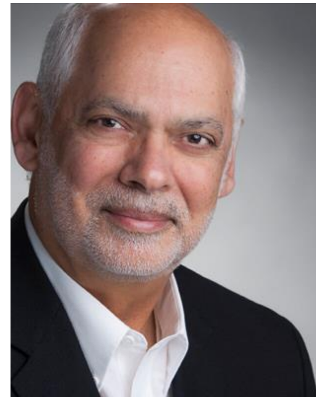
About the Reviewer



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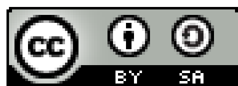

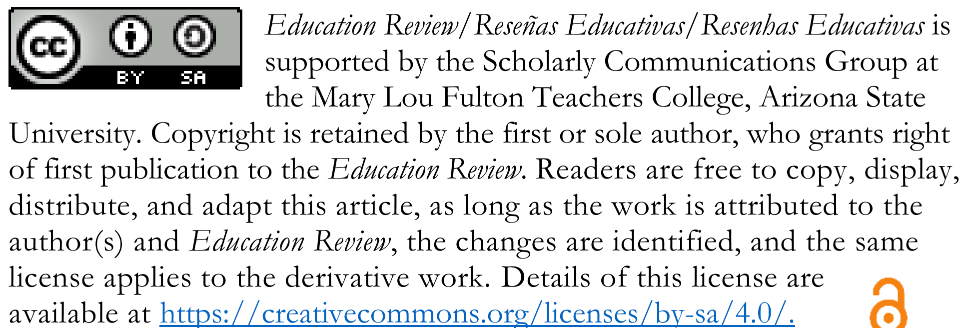

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