



education review // reseñas educativas

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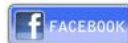
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Hess, Frederick M. & Osberg, Eric (2010) *Stretching the School Dollar: How Schools and Districts Can Save Money While Serving Students Best*. Harvard Education Press.

Pp. 368 ISBN 978-1-934742-64-8

Reviewed by Li Sha
Stanford University

Concurrent needs to reduce school spending and to improve student performances have been no greater than they are today. In this era of tightened resources, Hess and Osberg provided fresh insights into an urgent issue of school reform. Their new book *Stretching the school dollar* is wittily crafted and coherently organized, providing both short-term and long-term strategies regarding not only how to cut school spending, but more importantly how to boost productivity and efficiency at the same time. Bringing together a dynamic group of authors (scholars, consultants, entrepreneurs and journalists) the book helps readers to reexamine the management and instructional delivery in education in a refreshing way. For school leaders and policy makers who want specific

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suggestions and concrete ideas more than broad and general discussions, this is definitely the book that cannot be ignored.

The book equips school and state leader with reforming ideas up their sleeves—squeezing budgetary fat and enhancing education productivity. These two arms are argued to complement each other, and lacking of any of the two will lead to reform inefficiency. Unlike the traditional cost-effectiveness study, this book has a strong focus on K-12 schooling, where the traditional “more, better” leadership is argued to be replaced by a new mindset. Rather than providing sets of thoughts on broad strategies for school reform and improvements, the authors offered innovative but practical efforts of rethinking educational cost structure. Reformers are guided to decide “how to free up dollars they need to fuel reform.” And the reform is oriented towards “closing the achievement gap by race and income”, creating “a hybrid model of conventional instruction and independent learning,” linking professional development programs to the curriculums, and so much more.

The organization of the book is coherent, with fullness of development and fluidity. It starts with a warning message of the forthcoming “fiscal tsunami” that public schools have to face, tracing back to the historical growth of school spending. Developed from this context, creative ideas about budgeting in some cash-strapped districts were introduced as sparks to encourage further thinking. Built on these novel ideas, lights are shed on the main theme of the book – new ways of analysis on cost-effectiveness, student performances, resource allocation, operation efficiency, technology utilization and teaching qualities.

The book is not only constructed with skeletal strategies; rather, these strategies come to life with specific analysis and detailed examples. The delivery of these vivid examples is engaging and effective. Specific calculations are provided to identify possible savings. Financial data were analyzed to help determine teacher salary and class size. Tangible tools were offered to make better decisions about the allocation of scarce resources across competing priorities. Rigorous evidences were provided to ground education practice and policy. Detailed frameworks were offered to achieve coherence between strategy and

resource allocation. These examples offer remarkable analysis and guidance on how school leaders and policy makers can proceed. Practical ways to improve cost-effectiveness of educational practice, both in terms of new technology adoption and talent utilization, are also beautifully illustrated.

Since the authors are from diverse backgrounds, the book is of practical values with a concrete ideological grounding, and is rich with various perspectives. You can hear the voice of education policy leader about “penny saved” solution, loud and clear. You can experience the grassroots challenges of cutting costs through journalists’ eyes. You can have a taste of how to take initiatives to deploy teachers in an efficient way, to reduce class to a reasonable size, and to form class in a diagnostic manner from leaders in school reform and improvement. You can be guided into deeper thinking about how school should be organized in a new way—doing more with less—by experts in education policies. You can be greatly inspired about how to improve efficiency, to strengthen operations and to save money by the passionate consultants.

Despite of the collective endeavor to inspire new solutions and to provide recipes, as the authors pointed out, this book is not “a magical remedy for deep-seated political and cultural challenges”; rather, it exposes these challenges to the readers and promotes practical and efficient problem-solving. Indeed, there are inertia deeply rooted in large bureaucracies, and the preferences of teacher unions and parents might also make it difficult for districts to tackle the costs. It is a challenging job for district leaders to convince taxpayers to raise investment capital and increase revenue for the purpose of organizational effectiveness rather than political considerations. Also, areas for large potential cost savings and efficiency improvements can be pointed, but the identification, planning and realization of these savings and efficiencies is far from easy.

This book is timely, practical, informative and understandable for school and district leaders as well as policy makers. Crafted in a coherent and effective manner, the book is laced with vivid first-person tales, concrete data analysis, practical operational efforts, and deep concerns of the future challenges. Readers are pointed to a

path towards greater productivity and higher cost efficiency in school reform. The types of reforms, leadership skills, management disciplines and political changes the authors described in the books are essential today and even for the future, because the dual pressure for higher financial efficiency and greater academic performances always exists. As the authors pointed out, “To stay ahead of the coming fiscal tidal, fundamentally new models of schooling are needed.”

About the Reviewer

Li Sha is a first-year doctoral student in Organizational Studies program, School of Education, Stanford University. Her recent research interests include the coupling/decoupling of formal and informal structures of schools, co-evolution of social networks and creativity in schools. She enjoys traveling, painting and reading.

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