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Cuban, Larry. (2010) *As Good As It Gets: What School Reform Brought to Austin*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

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Reviewed by William J. Mathis
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In this aptly titled book, Larry Cuban examines Austin, Texas reforms during Superintendent Pat Forgone's near-decade long tenure. This urban district was blessed with all the advantages of broad based community support, the largesse of reform funders, and outside expertise in its implementation of a miscellany of contemporary neo-liberal reforms. But it still came up short, particularly for high schools in predominately minority and economically depressed communities.

An energetic and effective superintendent (a national urban superintendent of the year winner) with a supportive board did register successes in the district's affluent schools yet the school "failure"

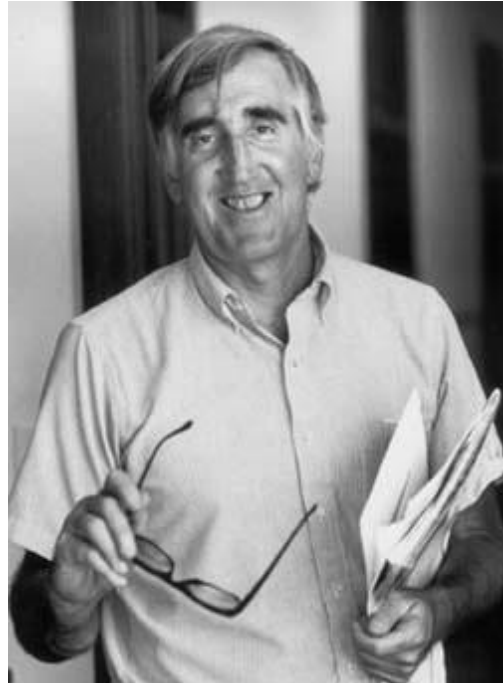


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rate was at 10% when he came and 10% when he left.

In his engaging narrative, **Cuban** opens the lid on the inner workings of an urban district and provides valuable and fascinating insights on why particular reforms were successful (and why some were not).

Following the adage that there is something already in that space before somebody tries to reform it, Cuban demonstrates the powerful historical forces that make Austin what it is. Such resident cultures block as well as advance reforms. The author strengthens his analysis by weaving-in parallel narratives from other urban districts. While the introduction and historical chapter may represent well-known national history, Cuban's insightful and unique examination makes these opening sections, alone, worth the price of the book. The author illustrates the lingering national legacies that influence Austin as well as the unique context of Austin.



The school district was cluttered with the “educationalizing” of social problems. Each of these reforms established a standing, bureaucratic legacy while the district attempted to respond to new demands. To further complicate matters, a new, unending stream of “policy churn” afflicted Austin, much as it does other districts. New reforms were not fully implemented before being washed away by the next wave of reforms. This phenomenon is most destructive in urban areas with high turn-over in leadership positions. Austin’s teacher turn-over, reaching a 20%-25% annual rate, also thwarted policy reform implementation. As such, this instability flashes a warning signal for federal and state “reconstitution” processes and proposals.

In the 1990s, this pattern of reform flooding was swamped by a virtual tsunami of “disruption” reform strategies (magnets, privatization, charters, etc.). “Shocking the system” was portrayed as a desirable and effective reform strategy and was adopted in federal and state test-based accountability systems.

Singled out and re-iterated throughout the text is the incapacitating effect of federal and state top-down, test-based accountability requirements is identified as a major factor thwarting educational progress.

Another repeating theme is the destructive effect of Austin's housing resegregation following the ascent of Republican policies, the decline of desegregation efforts and the embrace of segregated "community schools." Resegregation rose sharply with minority and economically needy neighborhoods concentrated on the East side with the Interstate forming a literal physical line of demarcation. Lip service was given to integration but reality was a three tier structure with consistently high performing white, middle class students in one sector; middle performing schools that drifted up or down from year-to-year; and low performing high-poverty, high-minority schools on the Eastside.

With long serving superintendents, Austin was basically a stable district through the last half of the twentieth century. The decade of the 1990s, however, saw high superintendent turn-over and a string of ineffective and weakly supported reforms. The resulting turbulence degenerated into melt-down in 1998-99.

Enter Pat Forgione with a clear management philosophy and a set of smart hires. Forgione, a former state testing director, state commissioner and NCES commissioner, focused on data and test-based accountability and stressed a single vision for the district. In his reforms, he showed a savvy ability to pick actions (such as character education and no soft drinks in the schools) that appealed to all parties. A strong board chair provided breathing room for the new superintendent, protecting him from chaotic and dysfunctional board meetings.

In the air-conditioned isolation and calmness of think-tanks, reform mavens simply do not consider the hurly-burly reality of a superintendent's life. Cuban contrasts Forgione's neat diagrams at research meetings with the daily bump-and-tumble in a school district. Any day can bring a crisis that distracts, diverts, delays or halts a reform. Examples included upheaval surrounding the firing of a high school principal, two hurricanes,

community demonstrations, a sudden and massive loss in state aid, and the sudden death of a student.

In terms of reinventing high schools, Austin gave the notion of small, personalized high schools a try with Gates money and outside support. The city adopted the whole school reform model centered on small communities, family advocates, and professional development.

Illustrative of many schools across the nation, prestigious Austin high school is a tale of two schools: One minority and one white, one failing and one not. In the strange and contradictory signals provided by AYP, Lanier was federally recognized as a “Blue Ribbon” high school, passed state accountability but failed AYP for four years and faces mandatory restructuring.

Under threat of accountability closure, Reagan high school implemented the model but was simultaneously grappling with massive community and family structure troubles. Not surprisingly, teaching was heavily focused on state test material. Reagan did not make AYP and principals were replaced. Johnston high school had 11 principals in 15 years. Despite all the concentrated high school reform efforts, Cuban observes “no miraculous increase in test scores occurred—such bolts seldom happen outside of Hollywood.”

But Forgione pressed on. Outside consultants were brought in, and a reformed “Disciplinary Literacy” approach was implemented. The program was rated positively by the program’s “teacher leaders” but even they said they didn’t have enough time to do it properly. Reform stress was taking its toll – too many initiatives were on a collision course. Centralizing reform in one district-level office streamlined efforts, yet by 2009, “no one—not the board of trustees, the superintendent, external evaluators or AISD officials—could say with any confidence . . . what exactly had changed.”

Cuban finds the constant threat of living under the AYP axe to be debilitating of the spirit as well as anxiety producing for teachers and administrators. Teachers are frustrated by the concentration on lower-order, test driven skills.

The author asks why schools should shoulder all the responsibility for student failures given that as recently as 1970, policy elites blamed children and their families. He traces the philosophical change to things like the overly optimistic promises of reformers such as Ron Edmunds who spoke about “high flying” ghetto schools. These fantasies are wryly dismissed by Cuban who says perfect equality may occur in heaven but will never materialize on earth where variability in families, talents, motivation, interests and skills remains a stubborn fact. Tax policies, income inequities, health insurance, residential segregation and discriminatory policies are also stubborn and debilitating facts.

In an astute reminder, Cuban notes that we invest very little in knowing what is going on in classrooms or whether a particular reform actually changed teacher and student knowledge and behavior in the desired way. The fundamental assumption is that some newly designed reform generated by politicians and non-educators will reshape teaching practices which result in better student outcomes. Often, the logical link to learning is missing and the empirical link is non-existent.

While case-study narratives can often seem too one-off or isolated, Cuban’s narrative provides strong insights. The sense of looking inside the black-box at what is really happening lends value and credibility to his report. However, by the time he gets to his recommendations, they don’t have the natural punch of his narrative—which has already delivered the message. Some of his recommendations seem to bear only a limited linkage to what went before (raise the ceiling, lift the floor, expand school choice at higher levels) while others (monitor reforms at all levels, and join with others in pushing for social reforms) track the narrative more directly, yet not as powerfully.

The take-away message is that a set of neo-liberal, test-based reforms implemented by a capable administrator and with reform conditions “as good as they get” does not guarantee success. In fact, no large urban district has achieved success as measured by contemporary accountability schemes—a sobering fact given the continued fealty to this basic reform model in ESEA reauthorization proposals. Cuban identifies the two

greatest barriers to reform success: (1) the highly resegregated and inequitable provision of education which is illustrated in the nation's urban, high poverty, high minority schools. (2) "The ill effects of the tight grip (of) state and federal accountability systems." Simply blaming the schools or requiring that they single-handedly resolve the problems of social inequality is a solution that holds little promise for schools or for society. Cuban deftly adds a well-executed case study to the empirical evidence.

About the Reviewer

William J. Mathis is the Managing Director of the National Education Policy Center, University of Colorado at Boulder. He previously served as superintendent of schools for the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in Brandon, Vermont and was a national superintendent of the year finalist as well as Vermont superintendent of the year. Earlier, he was Deputy Assistant Commissioner in New Jersey and worked with a number of colleges and universities on a full-time or adjunct basis. He has published and presented to a wide variety of professional and lay audiences on finance, assessment, accountability, school vouchers, cost-effectiveness, education reform, history, special education, and Constitutional issues. He serves as a member of the Vermont state board of education and on the national board of directors of the Rural School and Community Trust. He previously served on the board for the Association for Education Finance and Policy.



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