education review // reseñas educativas
editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

January 3, 2013 ISSN 1094-5296
Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu
and the College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
Follow *Education Review* on Facebook and on Twitter: #EducReview

Spencer, John P. (2012) *In the Crossfire: Marcus Foster and the Troubled History of American School Reform*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pp. 304 ISBN 978-0-8122-4435-9

Reviewed by Robert L. Hampel
University of Delaware

This excellent biography of a remarkable educator enriches the history of urban education. Marcus Foster led the transformation of three schools and one district during his career as a principal and superintendent. By carefully examining Foster's work in Philadelphia and Oakland, California from 1958 to 1973, John Spencer sheds new light on a pivotal era in the evolution of African American schools.

The apt title of this book carries multiple meanings. One bout of crossfire in the 1960s targeted the causes of black students' underachievement. Cultural deprivation? Family disintegration? Psychological pathologies? Genetics? In the minds of many commentators, those popular notions blamed the victims and ignored white

Citation: Hampel, Robert L. (2013 January 3) Review of *In the Crossfire: Marcus Foster and the Troubled History of American School Reform* by John P. Spencer. *Education Review, 16.* Retrieved [Date] from http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1202.pdf

prejudice; they also overlooked the importance of economic woes such as poverty, substandard housing, and feeble labor markets. And what about the schools? Why should educators be let off the hook?

For **Marcus Foster,**[1] it was not necessary to pinpoint the causes of the problem in order to create solutions. He knew that urban blacks faced many challenges, and in his opinion it made no sense to cast blame or point fingers at particular culprits. What mattered above all else was a change of attitude. Teachers had to raise their expectations. Students needed to envision a brighter future they could reach by staying in school and doing well. Parents could help in many ways; "You too are a teacher" was the title of one booklet Foster sent home. Local merchants could also pitch in. The goal was to mobilize everyone who could make education a priority in the hearts of the young.



Upbeat exhortations were not the whole story. To reinforce higher aspirations Foster created new programs and revived old ones—after school tutoring, evening classes for adults, sports teams, extracurricular clubs, National Honor Society. More important than anything else was his relentless focus on reading and writing. Significant gains in those two subjects would do more to change attitudes than all the speeches anyone could make. Black pride without academic achievement seemed hollow. To put the point another way, Foster would tell his students that they did not have to hold middle class values, but they definitely needed middle class skills. As a moderate, Foster drew crossfire from his right and left. On the right, the law-and-order advocates (like Philadelphia police chief Frank Rizzo) interpreted the ferment of the late 1960s as the collapse of adult authority. They saw student protests against racist teachers and curriculum as outrageous affronts. In contrast, Foster listened respectfully to outspoken students (and adults). He felt that apathy was worse than militancy, and proclaimed that he too was militant—about getting students to read.

[1] Marcus Albert Foster (March 31, 1923 – November 6, 1973). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Foster

Foster sought change from within the system, and throughout his career he simultaneously defended and criticized urban schools, even as his impatience grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not surprisingly, the Black Panthers and other radicals lambasted his moderation as cooptation by and capitulation to the enemy. The tragic result was his murder in 1973 by gunmen from the Symbionese Liberation Army, a small group of violent zealots (who later kidnapped heiress Patty Hearst).

If Foster were alive today, he would probably draw some crossfire for his brand of accountability. He welcomed measurable objectives and quantitative scorecards, but unlike current practices, he defined accountability broadly. Why exempt students, parents, school boards, and district leaders to monitor only teachers and principals? As Spencer demonstrates, it is wrong to pigeonhole the 1960s and early 1970s as an era when the quest for equality and equity overshadowed the drive for academic excellence. Foster embraced many forms of assessment and evaluation as additional tools in his array of measures to sustain a sense of urgency among everyone connected with schools. Using test results to make sweeping claims of success or failure (and then punish or reward the worst and best schools) was not his idea of sensible accountability.

Another valuable theme in this biography is the hard-to-measure but easy-to-recognize importance of the character and personality of school leaders. Much of Foster's success stemmed from his energy. Passion and stamina might be the two most underrated reasons why some administrators prevail and others do not. Foster had both, although he paid a high price: heart attacks, heavy drinking, and time away from his wife and family. Fed by daily Bible reading, his optimism inclined him to see the best in other people.

John Spencer sees the best in Marcus Foster, and the analysis throughout the book resembles the way Foster himself saw the world—nuanced, hopeful, and fair. This well-written and persuasively argued study should be required reading in courses on the principalship, school-community relations, multiculturalism, and urban education. Spencer's research in primary and secondary sources is exhaustive, as it must be for a first rate biography that examines the life, the work, *and* the world.

The book is easily accessible to readers unfamiliar with urban education, yet it will also reward everyone who thinks they know everything about the topic and the times. We need more biographies of outstanding principals and superintendents; let's hope they match the high standard John Spencer sets with this impressive book.

About the Reviewer



Robert L. Hampel, Professor, School of Education, University of Delaware. Bob Hampel is an historian of education (Cornell PhD). He served as Secretary-Treasurer of the History of Education Society from 2002 to 2011, and as Interim Director of the School of Education at the University of Delaware in 1998-2000 and 2010-2012. He wrote *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools since 1940* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986) and several dozen articles and chapters on educational reform past and present.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu and the College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware

Editors
David J. Blacker
blacker@edrev.info
Gustavo Fischman
fischman@edrev.info
Melissa Cast-Brede
cast-brede@edrev.info
Gene V Glass
glass@edrev.info

Follow *Education Review* on Facebook and on Twitter: #EducReview