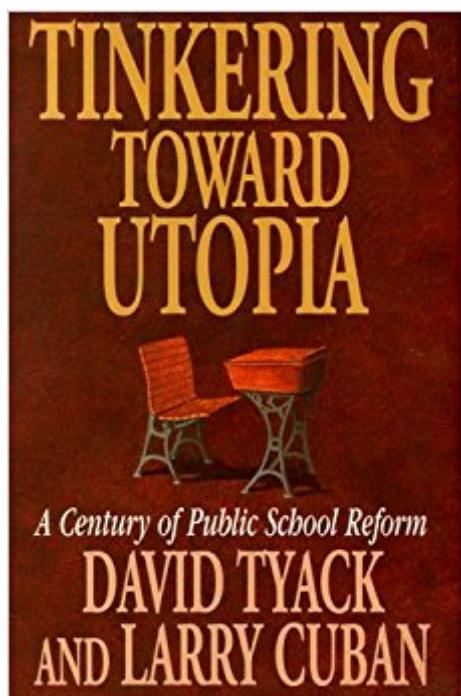


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# Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century Of Public School Reform



## Synopsis

For over a century, Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform. Although policy talk has sounded a millennial tone, the actual reforms have been gradual and incremental. *Tinkering toward Utopia* documents the dynamic tension between Americans' faith in education as a panacea and the moderate pace of change in educational practices. In this book, David Tyack and Larry Cuban explore some basic questions about the nature of educational reform. Why have Americans come to believe that schooling has regressed? Have educational reforms occurred in cycles, and if so, why? Why has it been so difficult to change the basic institutional patterns of schooling? What actually happened when reformers tried to "reinvent" schooling? Tyack and Cuban argue that the ahistorical nature of most current reform proposals magnifies defects and understates the difficulty of changing the system. Policy talk has alternated between lamentation and overconfidence. The authors suggest that reformers today need to focus on ways to help teachers improve instruction from the inside out instead of decreeing change by remote control, and that reformers must also keep in mind the democratic purposes that guide public education.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

No society has ever, at any time, tried to bring such a variety of people to so high a level of proficiency as this country has, or come as close to success as we have. American educational criticism suffers from a shocking lack of perspective, historical and cross-cultural...David Tyack and Larry Cuban...do recognize [this fact], and it's that understanding that makes their aptly titled book

so important...Surely the message Tyack and Cuban are trying to deliver is crucial: understand the political nature of school reform; involve teachers; understand how complex the process is and how much thought and patience it takes; learn from the past. When we try to use radical school reform to solve whatever public problem seems most urgent--that endless cycle of educational crisis, utopian demand and disillusionment--we fail both our schools and our society. (Peter Schrag Nation)

Superb...[Tyack and Cuban] calmly put the dense tomes of the education experts in clear perspective. [They] note how Americans have always looked to the nation's schools, with mixed results, to solve certain social, political and economic problems. (Sara Mosle New Republic)[This] is a book that should appeal to, and be read by, a wide audience: connoisseurs of millennial zeal; policy advisers; even chief inspectors of schools. Anyone, in fact, who is interested in the realities of reforming state education (known, of course, as public school education in the US) and the lessons that can be drawn from the past 100 years in America. Two insights have particular relevance. The first is that: "Good schools can play an important role in creating a just, prosperous and democratic society, but they should not be scapegoats and are not panaceas"...The second insight is equally important. The political will might be strong; the social conviction passionate. "The journey from policy talk to what occurs in schools and classrooms", however, is "long, often unpredictable and complicated." (Chris Woodhead (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools) New Statesman)

In their splendid little book Stanford University Professors David Tyack and Larry Cuban adopt a radical approach to the ongoing crisis in the American public school system: listen to the teacher, let the teacher decide. Thus is the conclusion of this succinct, but hard-hitting history of reform of public schools in the United States over the last hundred years...This book is...a revelation. (Kevin White American Studies)

If I could place one book before the many people--from legislators to business and civic groups--calling for school reform, it would be Tinkering toward Utopia. It is a wise and sobering book. Tyack and Cuban raise caution about the quick fix or the "visionary" solution and remind us of the power of the hard, day-to-day human work of social change. (Mike Rose, author of Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America)

The authors...are two of the brightest minds in American education. Mr. Tyack is the best education historian...Mr. Cuban...is one of the United States" leading experts in the problems of school organization and structure...This is a bold, cobweb-clearing book that challenges many of the assumptions that Americans have about their schools. Anyone seriously interested in education reform ought to read it. (Washington Times)This accessible examination of the reasons for and effects of such wide-ranging historic reforms as graded schools, IQ testing, school site management, and ability grouping helps to put many of today's proposals for improving schools in sharper focus. (Diane Manuel San Jose Mercury

News)Tinkering toward Utopia belongs in a special genre of books about education by historians. The genre does not represent history as such but draws on a deep base of historical knowledge to address wider issues of educational policy. David Tyack and Larry Cuban have successfully written a difficult book, one that demonstrates how historical perspectives can reconstruct a policy discourse...The arguments advanced here have two powerful assumptions, generally ignored in the historiography of education. First, policy making can only be understood as an ongoing "interaction

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In Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform, David Tyack and Larry Cuban present education reform through a detailed analysis of the past century, highlighting reforms that were imposed upon educators along with those that developed from within the education community. Tyack and Cuban do a thorough job describing how the implementation of reform initiatives redefined teaching and learning throughout the past century. By viewing the history of education reform, we are able to see how education has arrived to where it currently is and possibly predict or influence its future direction. Lastly, Tyack and Cuban do a wonderful job explaining schools as institutions with their own valued culture, where teachers can improve education for their students with the right support. Tinkering Toward Utopia is a timeline of education reform meant for educators, social professionals, policymakers, and scholars. The main arguments are that educational reform takes place in incremental progress, the grammar of schooling persists, and reform initiatives should not be imposed in a top down approach but rather from within the classroom. The first chapter, "Progress or Regress," gives a historical account of educational reform from Horace Mann to the administrative progressives to the 1990's. Education was held in high regard as being responsible for the future of the society. However, the administrative progressives' belief that education could be standardized and would improve education for all had failed. There were large disparities in educational opportunities with the poor, blacks, working-class immigrants, disabled, and females suffering most from the inequities. Interestingly, even with the social ills of poverty and segregation, during the 1940's and 50's schools were fairing well; the community and

parents were satisfied with their school and teachers. In the mid 1950's a new form of progress was breaking through the educational arena in a campaign for "simple justice." From the 1970's onward, people began to show disappointment in schools and in the 1980's with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, people began to believe that schools and test scores needed to improve if we were to improve our society. Tyack and Cuban do not take a side of either progress or regress. However, they do state that, "The public schools, for all their faults, remain one of our most stable and effective public institutions" (pg. 38). The fourth chapter, "Why the Grammar of Schooling Persists," discusses the stability within the school system. The basic grammar of schooling has not changed. School hours, the physical space within the classroom, grades, credits, and subjects have remained the same. Although some have challenged the grammar of schooling, the initiatives have disappeared leaving a few changes but nothing insofar as to drastic change the grammar of schooling. A few innovative initiatives include the ungraded schools, departmental specialization in elementary, and teachers working in teams. All of which attempted to make positive changes to teaching and learning. The fifth chapter, "Reinventing Schooling," describes the impact of drastic initiatives in reforming education. Initiatives such as electronic pedagogy, contracting instruction, managing education, merit pay, and teaching by machine have been implemented and resisted by educators nor have they proven to work better than the public schools. Presently, with the paradigm of standardization leading assessments, curriculum, instruction, Tyack and Cuban's *Tinkering Toward Utopia* can help educators understand the progress that has been made within the education system. Education reform is an incremental progress, tinkering, from within the framework of the schools, not a mandated top down approach. Tyack and Cuban advocate for reforms that help teachers improve instruction from inside the classroom as opposed to a top down approach.

Great text book! Tyack and Cuban recount the history of how the public schools were formed and the reforms that followed up until 1995 when the book was written. This book shows how public schools directly impact society as a whole, to include the politics involved with school reforms. As a bonus, the Kindle version helps education students locate and cite passages quickly and efficiently, just by looking at the notes section in your Kindle app or device, or by typing in a keyword in the search. The notes section will contain all of your highlighted passages. The only issue is that there are no pages indicated, but rather 'locations' within the book, so you will have to use APA style for referencing electronic books. It would be nice though, if all electronic books display the page numbers and even the chapter that should appear at the top of the app or Kindle device.

I required the book *Tinkering Toward Utopia* for a Master's level education class. The subject is Public School Reform over the last century. The book was written in 1995 so it is several years old. However, the book was paired with another book about school reform that is more recent. It is disturbing to realize how little we have learned and how politics plays such a large part in whether or not public education (K - 12) in the United States will ever be as good as other countries who have far surpassed us.

I found the book extremely valuable in presenting the forces acting on the public education system in the US. Helped me recognize the interplay between educational, learning, and various sociopolitical systems, highlighting various level of potential innovations with the realities of leading students to real understanding. And it is very well written.

good read

This text was for class and therefore proprietary to higher education. A great read with easy to read text that allowed excellent comprehension of the subject matter. Pedagogy and its history at its best.

David Tyack demonstrates how we as Americans believe that our schools can be a panacea of society's ills, but that this is a fallacy. What actually occurs is that change in our schools is very slow and often takes decades. In many ways, they have not changed. If you want to read a thought provoking book about American school reform, this is it!

Loved this book. For a student in education this was inspiring.

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