
Introduction

Although an increasing number of states and school districts are adopting a variety of education reform programs, too many of these so-called reforms are based on political palatability rather than on whether they will actually increase student achievement. Increased per-pupil spending, smaller class sizes, more technology in the classroom, and national certification of teachers may be relatively easy for political and education decisionmakers to propose and enact, but there is little evidence that such measures have more than a minor impact on improving the ability of students to read, write, or do math.

In order to effect real and long-lasting change, it is necessary to understand the basic nature of our education problems and the remedies that address them. This anthology seeks to accomplish these important objectives.

A joint undertaking of the Hoover Institution and the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, *School Reform: The Critical Issues* assembles some of the most insightful and provocative articles on education reform in recent years. The subjects covered touch such critical areas as teaching and classroom methodology, testing, special education, school choice, and many others. The articles state the problems realistically and then propose reasonable and effective alternatives.

For example, in the first selection on progressive education, two articles by *Los Angeles Times* reporter Richard Lee Colvin discuss the nature and pitfalls of the education philosophy that is so popular in university schools of education. In the first, Colvin describes the views of Alfie Kohn, one of the most visible proponents of progressive education, whose anti-testing, anti-grading, pro-student-self-esteem message is popular among many educators. In the second, Colvin describes a Berkeley, California elementary school that has implemented many of the progressive ideas supported by Kohn and others, with disastrous results. In the same section, renowned

education author E.D. Hirsch, Jr., outlines a more traditional and empirically supportable alternative teaching strategy.

The section on teachers reveals some of the shortcomings surrounding the profession, with Sol Stern on the stifling effect of teacher unions, Maribeth Vander Weele on the difficulty in firing bad teachers, and Heather Mac Donald on why teachers are ineffective. These are followed by articles about real change, such as Siobhan Gorman's piece on teacher evaluation and Diane Ravitch's article on testing teachers. In another section, Chester Finn, Jr., and Michael Petrilli analyze the downsides of reducing class size, while William Capps and Mary Ellen Maxwell explain why it is better to have smaller schools.

Overall, then, this book will give the reader, whether he or she is a legislator, school board member, teacher, member of the media, or parent, an understanding of why schools and students are underperforming. It will also explain why some reforms are destined to be disappointments whereas others have been proven to work. The editors hope that the lessons contained in the articles in this volume will inform the continuing debate over education reform. It must be emphasized that these are not just academic lessons. The prospects of our students depend heavily on the kind of education policy we adopt. The goal of the book is to guide policymakers and the public in decisions that will not just promise change but actually deliver results that ensure a brighter future for our children.