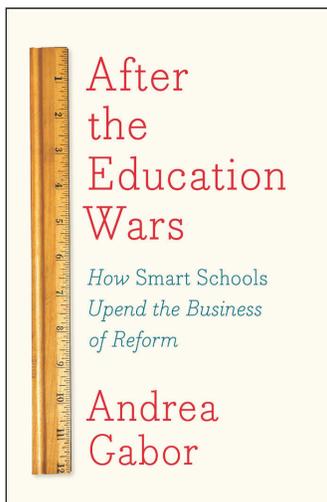

Democracy & Education

Learning from the Quiet Revolution A Book Review of *After the Education Wars: How Smart Schools Upend the Business of Reform*

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AS READERS OF this journal are surely aware, in recent years, education reform has become increasingly influenced by corporate entities. Consequently, school reform is now characterized by a narrow focus on economic competitiveness, an obsession with top-down standards, an increase in high-stakes standardized testing, and the widespread deprofessionalization of public school teachers. In *After the Education Wars: How Smart Schools Upend the Business of Reform*, Gabor (2018) offers a series of powerful counternarratives that challenge the deeply flawed, corporate-based school reform movement.

In her hard-hitting introduction, “The Quiet Revolution,” Gabor (2018) initiated her critique of our present educational reality and the faulty logic of the reformers behind it. The objective of her book, she stated, is to demonstrate “that the corporate-reform industry that is gaining ever-increasing influence on how American schools educate children has largely ignored the successful examples and strategies for improving schools that are hiding in plain sight. These distinct examples together form something of a quiet revolution in education” (p. 3). Thus, from Gabor’s perspective, the central issue here is that education reformers are taking the wrong lessons from the worlds of business and education. These “business reformers,” as she called them, “came to the education table with their truths: a belief in market competition and quantitative measures . . .” Also:



They came with the arrogance that elevated polished, but often mediocre (or worse), technocrats over scruffy but knowledgeable educators. And, most of all, they came with their suspicion—even their hatred—of organized labor and their contempt for ordinary public school teachers. (p. 4)

Gabor argued that instead of embracing these truths, reformers should learn from successful schools, districts, and businesses that have quietly fomented their own revolutions. These examples of successful reform share a “particular cultural and organizational DNA” (p. 7) in that they emphasize democratic collaboration and feature leaders who practice participative management and inspire trust. Additionally, these examples are often insulated from bureaucratic interference, and they use data carefully while acknowledging its limitations. Following this argument, Gabor briefly described several examples of successful education reform (these each receive their own chapter) and connected them to the ideas of W. Edwards Deming, a quality expert from the business world who trumpeted the process of continuous improvement and advocated a systems-oriented, bottom-up management approach

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that encouraged collaboration and intrinsic motivation and elevated the knowledge of those on the ground. The reader will become intimately acquainted with Deming's ideas, as they serve as a central thread throughout the book.

Gabor (2018) expanded upon the ideas outlined in her introduction through a series of chapters that read like interconnected, yet distinct, case studies. Each chapter highlights specific examples of bottom-up, collaborative, systems-oriented education reform, and Gabor took aim throughout at the flawed corporate-based education reform movement that threatens these success stories. In chapter one, "Big Dreams, Small Schools: How Entrepreneurial Rebels Built a Movement in New York City," Gabor directs the reader's attention to New York City in the 1970s to explore the origins of a progressive, small-schools movement. She detailed the efforts of Deborah Meier, Ann Cook, Herb Mack, and other pioneers as they launched several grassroots-driven educational experiments in New York. Over the decades, this "progressive coalition," as she referred to them (p. 25), grew to include hundreds of schools across the country while maintaining New York City as its epicenter. Gabor provided a detailed account of the movement's evolution, the various challenges it confronted, and the educational values and practices it promoted; these included the construction of small schools that privileged teacher collaboration and voice, a professional development and mentoring process that encouraged inquiry-based teaching, and an improvement-focused, iterative accountability system untethered to standardized testing. Throughout this chapter, Gabor also emphasized how corporate reformers missed the most important lessons to be learned from the progressive school movement. For instance, reformers in the Gates Foundation and Bloomberg administration largely attributed the success of these schools to their small size, and these individuals failed to recognize "the collaboration, the teamwork, the democracy, the *trust*" that made these progressive schools function so well (p. 73, emphasis in original). Readers should find this chapter to be particularly edifying, as Gabor effectively illustrated the vast gulf that exists between progressive educators on the ground and myopic corporate reformers and bureaucrats who peer down from elevated offices and boardrooms.

Chapter two, "Testing Power: When Is Disruption Just . . . Disruptive?" builds on the first chapter in that it explores what the Bloomberg administration borrowed, and also failed to adopt, from the small-schools movement. Gabor described the Bloomberg administration's goal of disrupting New York City's central bureaucracy and massive, factory-like high schools through a series of education and business partnerships. She also discussed how the Bloomberg education department privileged the voices of business leaders over educators, and she examined the associated consequences. What follows in this sprawling chapter is a series of critiques of several problematic educational disruptions, including the corporate-funded iZone school network, the Common Core State Standards and associated standardized tests, and an explosion of charter schools. Throughout, Gabor also included a discussion of Global Tech, an innovative public school that reflects some of the tenets of the progressive coalition discussed in the first

chapter; Gabor used this school to effectively highlight the stark differences between small, progressive schools and extensions of corporate-based education reform such as no-excuses charter schools.

Chapters three and four ("State of Reform: The Not-So-Quiet Revolution in Massachusetts" and "No Lone Stars: How Trust and Collaboration in One Texas School District Have Created Lasting Reform") also draw the reader's attention to specific schools (and districts) that serve as powerful examples of successful reform. First turning to Massachusetts, Gabor (2018) examined Brockton High School, a school that benefited from grassroots-level efforts, democratic leadership, and bipartisan education policy; in this, one of the strongest chapters in the book, Gabor shifted effectively throughout from micro to macro as she discussed school-level reform alongside state-level policy. Refocusing to Texas in chapter four, Gabor unpacked how the Leander School District explicitly adopted Deming's ideas of continuous improvement and grassroots-driven quality. By centering her discussion on the trust, teamwork, and collaboration that characterize this thriving district, Gabor forcefully rebuked the "top-down accountability-obsessed culture that dominates American education" (p. 169).

Gabor continued her rebuke in chapter five, "The Hurricane and the Charters: New Schools Unearth Old Ways in New Orleans," as she took aim at the explosion of charter schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. This chapter is particularly eye-opening, as Gabor argued that the so-called charter school miracle in New Orleans should be viewed as a cautionary tale that illustrates how top-down, outside-in, market-based education reforms often hurt the most vulnerable children. Gabor did a tremendous job of pulling back the curtain on the New Orleans charter experiment and of illustrating the specific negative effects of these reforms on students, teachers, and communities. Here is a sample of her critique:

The first decade of the New Orleans charter revolution hearkens back to an early age of oligopoly, union-busting, and top-down hierarchy. For most of the city's poor African American parents, school choice has boiled down to a thin-gruel menu of test-prep and strict-discipline, no-excuses schools. (p. 198)

With evocative writing like this featured throughout, this may be the book's most powerful chapter.

Gabor used her conclusion, "A Civic Action: How Schools—and Society—Benefit from Real Democracy," to neatly tie together the central points of her text and to extract some key lessons from the successful schools and districts highlighted throughout. Offering her book's primary argument in a nutshell, she wrote:

This book has argued that continuous improvement is a must for public education, especially in an advanced technological age. It has shown that schools can learn from the philosophy of systems thinkers and the grassroots participative ideas associated with the open-source software movement and the most successful twenty-first-century business practices . . . And it endorses the idea that schools offer an

arena for practicing and learning about democratic governance.
(p. 263)

Importantly, Gabor also used her conclusion to highlight what successful examples of education reform are presently up against: President Donald Trump, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, and neoliberal education policy on steroids. Overall, I found the conclusion to be particularly effective, as Gabor managed to synthesize the central points of her text while offering an articulate, critical assessment of the present political landscape.

Ultimately, I believe this is a valuable book for those interested in education reform. For readers of this journal, some of the points Gabor (2018) made are likely not new; most supporters of progressive, democratic education are already aware of the importance of teacher voice, inquiry-based learning, and generative, collaborative work. Regardless, I believe the instructive examples of successful education reform Gabor described are likely unfamiliar to both readers of this journal and the broader public. While both groups should indeed benefit from this book, perhaps the latter audience needs it most. As Gabor noted in her introduction, the narrative of public school failure, and the associated belief that schools are overflowing with bad teachers in need of top-down accountability measures, has unfortunately become commonplace. Thus, it is vital that the general public has access to texts like this that forcefully challenge these dominant, false narratives. It is also worth noting here that Gabor is able to successfully contest these narratives because her arguments are heavily supported by sound research; the extensive research that went into this book should impress readers, as there is an

abundance of referenced material, interview data, and firsthand observations included throughout. Readers will likely also appreciate how Gabor delivered these well-supported arguments through accessible, engaging prose.

Gabor's (2018) most significant strength, though, may be her ability to create an engrossing reading experience via her intense focus on individual schools, districts, and communities. Conversely, I feel this approach could also be viewed as one of the book's rare weaknesses, in that I sometimes felt so absorbed in the minutia, and my perspective so singularly focused, that I lost sight of the text's larger themes and ideas. While Gabor's conclusion effectively tied together many of the individual threads that run throughout the book, I suspect the text would have benefited from more macro-level analysis within each chapter as well. Despite this minor criticism, I maintain that this is a useful, and exceedingly timely, book. As corporate entities increasingly dictate the direction of education reform, it is vital that supporters of democratic education continue to critically examine their policies and the ideological assumptions undergirding them. We must also continue to seek out counter-examples, or alternative educational possibilities, that offer us more inclusive and socially just ways forward. Ultimately, I believe, as Gabor (2018) does, that the examples of successful education reform featured in her book "offer a beacon toward which schools, districts, and educators can—and must—steer their craft" (p. 295).

References

Gabor, A. (2018). *After the education wars: How smart schools upend the business of reform*. New York, NY: The New Press.