

SAVING SCHOOLS: FROM HORACE MANN TO VIRTUAL LEARNING

by Paul E. Peterson

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. 320 pp. \$25.95 (hardcover).

In his engaging new book *Saving Schools: From Horace Mann to Virtual Learning*, Paul Peterson argues that the visions and contributions of six key figures have considerably shaped the trajectory of education in the United States, and he poses a seventh figure as a likely trendsetter for the next wave of educational reform. Recounting almost two hundred years of educational history, Peterson argues that the visions of these six individuals—visions intended to save our nation's schools—were never realized. Instead, he asserts, each man's life's work ultimately pushed schools further from their shared ideal of local control and into the grasp of greater federal and centralized authority. Looking to a future of virtual learning, Peterson theorizes that students and families may finally gain true control and authentic choice in education, which will bring to fruition the intentions of history's educational leaders.

Crediting his six central players as having the “missionary zeal and reform-minded ideas” (p. 12) that shaped education in the United States, Peterson devotes much of the book to outlining the lives and contributions of these men. He begins with Horace Mann, describing the landscape of education in the early nineteenth century and the means by which Mann influenced the adoption of free and compulsory education, normal schools for teacher training, and the gathering of educational statistics in Massachusetts—trends that later spread nationwide. Peterson then introduces John Dewey and his philosophical views on pedagogy and institutional reform, recounting the ways in which Dewey developed and disseminated his progressive ideals through his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago and an army of “disciples” at both Chicago and Columbia. The third key figure is Martin Luther King Jr., who Peterson identifies as the only “genuine hero” (p. 53) among the six. He outlines King's role as a central figure in the school desegregation movement, particularly his ability to mobilize public support for desegregation.

Peterson's next significant trendsetter is Albert Shanker, an influential leader in the founding and development of the United Federation of Teachers, which won teachers the right of collective bargaining and established many of the working conditions that teachers still experience today. U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett—whom Peterson describes as “a high priest of the excellence movement” (p. 157)—is the fifth key figure, credited with drawing national attention to the competing interests of choice and accountability in education. Peterson rounds out his sextet with sociologist James Coleman, whose controversial reports—noting the impacts of family background on achievement, of white flight on school segregation, and of private schools on student performance—framed educational trends from the

1960s forward. Throughout his portrayals, Peterson argues that the visions of these six men, each working toward localized control of schools through different means, were never fully realized. Rather, their work, ideas, and efforts ultimately resulted in the overcentralized, overregulated, and overgoverned school system we have today.

In the final chapter of the book, Peterson shifts from interpreting the past to predicting the future by theorizing that the next turn in education will be toward greater reliance on virtual learning because of its ability to personalize learning and its freedom from many of the bureaucracies of brick-and-mortar schools. Here he introduces Julie Young and the Florida Virtual School, both recognized for their innovative use of online technology in meeting students' needs, and he posits this format as the way of the future. However, given the unrealized visions recounted throughout the book, Peterson's suggestion that virtual learning could finally realize local control of education seems somewhat optimistic, even if intriguing.

Across the volume, Peterson's strong editorial voice presents a compelling tale of trendsetters in educational policy and practice. Readers may question, however, whether Peterson overstates the influence of his six central figures, particularly given the countless other influential players and events that also appear throughout the book. In fact, pervasive throughout the tale are the critical roles of policy makers, scholars, legal advocacy groups, and court decisions that framed education reality for millions of students. Also, questionably, Peterson attends considerably to debates around school choice, asserting that even though only a tiny fraction of the nation's students experience charter schools, voucher programs, and home schooling, these options create a framework for the future role of choice in virtual learning. Peterson's own contributions as a leading researcher and thinker in the choice movement may lead him to overstate the short-term impact and long-term potential of choice to shape the educational landscape. In total, Peterson presents a riveting and detailed history of pivotal moments in U.S. education that, unfortunately, ultimately calls into question his central premise that two hundred years of educational history can be credited to six key figures. The detailed and rich events recounted in this volume paint a much more complex picture of influence and power.

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