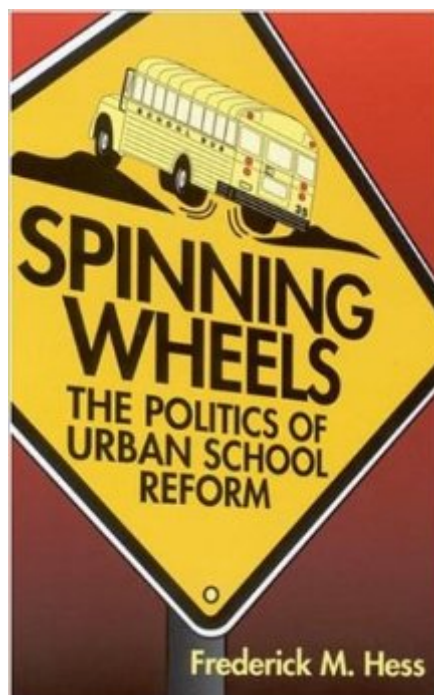


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Spinning Wheels: The Politics Of Urban School Reform



Synopsis

Almost everyone agrees that America's urban schools are a mess. But while this agreement has fostered widespread support for aggressive reform, Frederick Hess argues that much of what ails urban education is actually the result of continuous or fragmentary reform. Hess explains that political incentives drive school superintendents to promote reforms--to demonstrate that they are "making a difference." Superintendents have to do this quickly, both because their tenure is usually three years or less and because urban communities are anxious to see educational improvement. However, the nature of urban school districts makes it very difficult to demonstrate concrete short-term improvement. The result is what he terms "policy churn," which distracts teachers and principals from efforts to refine classroom teaching while seldom resulting in successful long-term changes. Hess argues that policymakers have misallocated resources by pursuing the "right" structure or the "best" pedagogy while paying insufficient attention to the more mundane--and more important--questions of how to implement, refine, and sustain a particular approach in their particular district. Hess explains that previous research on high-performing schools suggests that the best schools are characterized by focus and by an ability to develop expertise in specific approaches to teaching and learning. To help educators and policymakers adopt and nurture a focused agenda, he recommends institutional changes that increase the effectiveness of performance outcomes and reduce the incentives to emphasize symbolic reform.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is about a very basic problem in urban schools, the problem of reform churn. In surveying over 60 urban schools, the author found that there is a pattern of school boards hiring new school superintendents, who comes in with great promise and lots of new ideas. There are lots of changes for a couple years, but there is no dramatic improvement, so the current school superintendent gets fired because things are still bad. Then a new superintendent comes in, again promising to fix things by implementing a lot of changes. The net result is no reform last long enough to truly fix any problems. The school district keeps lurching in different directions every couple years, never making any real progress. As I read this book I thought of:-----"We trained hard, but it seemed every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization"From Petronii Arbitri Satyricon AD 66. Attributed to Gaius Petronus Gaius Petronus, a Roman General, later committed suicide-----A pattern on constant reform is not new. Frederick Hess analyses the environment that produces this pattern in the school environment. He finds that in general members of the school board want to be re-elected. Many are using the office of school board as a stepping stone to other elected political offices. In general school boards which fight with each other don't get re-elected, so they are motivated to find issues they can agree on, and reform is an issue for which most board members see a need.

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