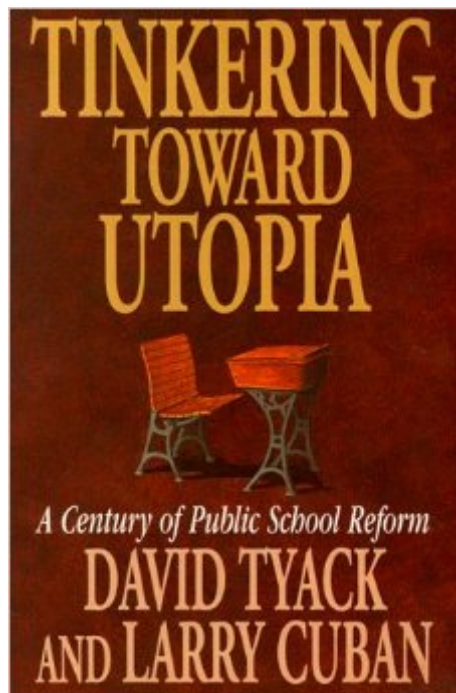


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Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century Of Public School Reform



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.

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Customer Reviews

The history of public school reform in the United States has been characterized by institutional inertia and myriad failed attempts at wholesale change. Although policy elites, educators, school pundits, and the lay public regularly disagree about why we have intractable schools, David Tyack and Larry Cuban, in *Tinkering toward Utopia*, argue that a careful and complete understanding of

schools as institutions has long eluded those who attempt to effect change in schools. The authors also claim that incremental change in education is a natural and viable phenomenon, not a symbol of a failed system. By rendering these arguments through sociopolitical and historical lenses, they present a comprehensive take on the stagnancy of school reform. Although the word tinkering can connote clumsiness or incompetence, the authors use it in an equivocal sense in order to argue that educational change for better or worse has been piecemeal, largely due to what they call the grammar of schooling. Radical reforms, such as merit-based teacher pay and open classrooms, have repeatedly failed to make a lasting impression on schools largely because they have attempted to alter the structural and behavioral regularities that are entrenched in the notion of what constitutes a "real school." The argument, although effective, is nothing new: Sarason's (1971) illustrative example of the "man from outer space" immediately comes to mind. However, Tyack and Cuban take this argument to another level by diagnosing many failed reform efforts as "too intramural" (p. 108), and incongruent with external forces (e.g., college admission requirements, labor market needs). How the grammar of schooling was engendered and why it has remained seemingly immutable is the real thrust of the problem.

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