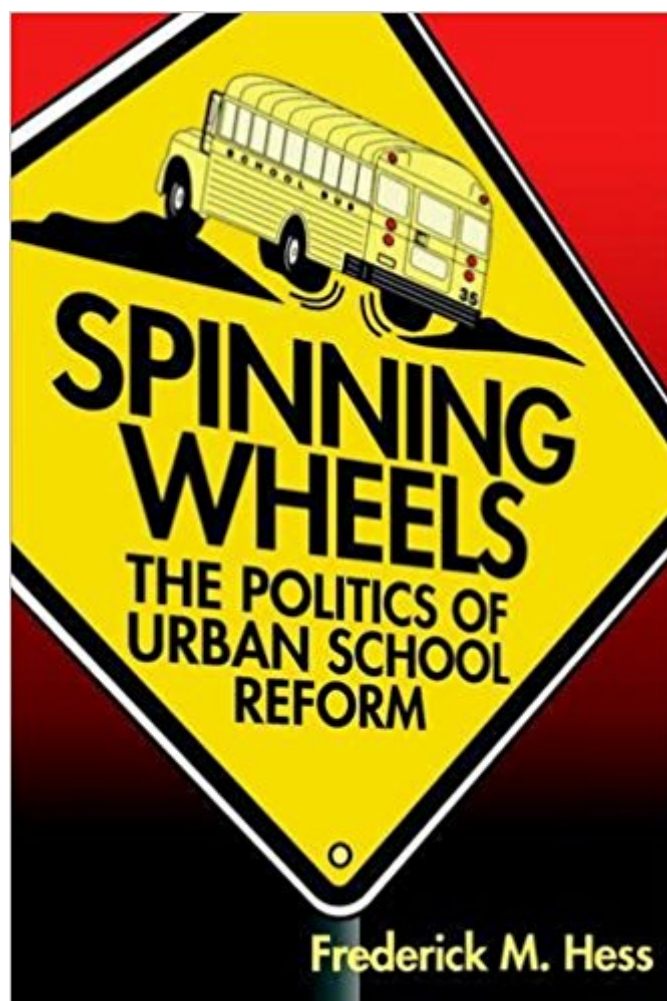


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Spinning Wheels: The Politics Of Urban School Reform



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.

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Customer Reviews

"The strength in Hess's work lies in his thorough critique of the limitations of past reforms and related policy issues. He effectively documents the many issues and activities related to past school reforms. " —Don T. Martin, University of Pittsburgh"Hess's carefully articulated political-institutional framework makes an important contribution to our understanding of the causes, extent, and consequences of policy churn and provides food for thought with regard to designing further studies of urban education reform. " —Melissa J. Marschall, University of South Carolina"This book should be read by graduate students, policy makers, and professionals and practitioners. " —N. L. Arnez, emeritus, Howard University

Frederick M. Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. He is the coauthor (with Michael J. Petrilli) of *No Child Left Behind Primer* (Peter Lang, 2006) and editor of *Educational Entrepreneurship* (Harvard Education Press, 2006).

I chose this rating because the book is a great source for Urban Ed Reform, and it is very useful in my class.

I agree with the review of Henry Cate III. I have read a large number of books about education and I think the author is quite correct. However, it is an even larger problem. Any attempt at making major improvements in education is I believe a futile effort. The education system, like the criminal justice system and the health care system reflect the society as a whole with its characteristic problems, inequality, injustice, and incoherence. These systems of symptoms and will not be improved until the general society is improved or changed fundamentally. I am not talking about socialist revolution but a fundamental increase in fairness and equal opportunity and decrease in discrimination and all of the barriers to fairness and equal opportunity. We won't have any real progress in any sphere until we can eliminate the essential corruption at the heart of our society and economy. There are many good people working in the education field and good work being done and this should be continued simultaneous to general efforts to improve our society. Good books and other information on education can be found here: [mwir education blogspot](#). I create educational websites, Midwest Independent Research.

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. So when there is a problem in the school district, they don't hire a new school superintendent who comes in promising to continue the reforms of the previous superintendent, they hire someone with fresh new ideas. The result is the old reforms which may have just started producing fruit are ignored and teachers are told to try some new methods. The result is things are not improving in the urban schools. The author makes the point that schools deal with two very important subjects, children and money. People are concerned that both are taken care of well. Unfortunately there are no simple objective measures to see how well a school is doing. This is partly the result of there being no clear, agreed upon, purpose to education. Some want children taught academic subjects, some want children to learn to be good citizens, some want children to be taught to take care of the earth, and so on. All of this means that people care very much about schools, but people can't tell how well a school is doing. So appearances become very important. Both the school board and the superintendent are strongly influenced to put on a good front. This idea of appearances being very important is explored in great depth in the book. And other related ideas are mentioned on why there is such a dizzying rate of reform efforts in urban schools. The book is well written. It is well structured. The author has done his research. It is interesting to read, though often painful to learn how bad things are. If you are looking for a better understanding of one of the key problems with public schools, this book is very worth reading.

The book *Spinning Wheels* represents a series of books that have outlined the breakdown of the

traditional administrative model of education. The book does an outstanding job investigating the inherent paradoxes of urban education. The traditional model has collapsed and a new model for the 21st Century is critical to the future K-12 education in America. It is amazing that the restructuring of the Administrative cadre has not taken place in 1999. The tragedy of the traditional model is that it does not reflect the massive changes of the quality management movement instituted by Juran. The mistaken notion that today's administrative cadre needs no essential training in modern management theory and practice is very similar to the Communist Chinese cadre who believe that a modern capitalistic economy can be created without a fundamental understanding of modern economic theory and practice. *Spinning Wheels* captures the triumph of political rhetoric over real managerial changes that need to be implemented in administration. The modern urban superintendent is trapped by a demographic paradox between the X generation and the Achievement generation that has created a "policy churn" in the killing fields of modern urban education.

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