Educators vote on most important educational policy books of the decade

According to a poll of more than 4,000 readers of the journal Education Next, the most important education policy book of the decade is The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education (2010) by Diane Ravitch, an education historian and former assistant secretary of education.

Once a champion of the role accountability, school choice and the market could play in education, Ravitch explains why she changed her mind about many of the most popular reforms she once supported in her book and makes strong arguments for a national curriculum.

The book won the #1 slot of most important books of the last decade by a wide margin in the survey—22% of readers selected her book from a list of 41 candidates. Education Next, asked its online and print readers to name 3 books they believed were the most important of the last decade. A total of 4,343 readers participated.

Ravitch found herself at the center of controversy after her book was published.

“She has done more than any one I can think of in America to drive home the message of accountability and charters and testing,” Arthur E. Levine, a former president of Teachers College, told the New York Times. “Now for her to suddenly conclude that she’s been all wrong is extraordinary — and not very helpful.”

The 7 other books chosen by 3% or more of Ed Next readers are as follows:

2. E. D. Hirsch, The Knowledge Deficit (2006)—9%
3. Linda Darling Hammond, The Flat World and Education (2009)—8%
4. Karin Chenoweth, It’s Being Done (2007)—7%
5. Daniel Willingham, Why Don’t Students Like School (2009)—6%
6. Deborah Meier, In Schools We Trust (2002)—5%
7. Clayton Christensen, Curtis John and Michael Horne, Disrupting Class (2008)—3%
8. Anthony Bryk et al. Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago (2010)—3%

The Knowledge Deficit warns that without an effective curriculum, American students are losing the global education race. Hirsch shows that schools need to help students develop the complex and essential skill of reading comprehension with rich content and by building core knowledge. The educational theorist also takes educators to task for claims that they are powerless to overcome class differences.

In The Flat World and Education (2009), Linda Darling Hammond contends that improving America’s performance in the global economy is tied to closing the minority–majority achievement gap at home. Today in the U.S, only 1 in 10 low-income kindergartners graduates from college. The U.S. high school graduation rate has dropped from first in the world to the bottom half of rankings for comparable nations. The author focuses on the successes of effective school systems in the
U.S. and abroad in order to develop a clear and coherent set of policies that can be used to create high-quality and equitable schools.

It's Being Done focuses on schools that are successful and have high percentages of students with low incomes and students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Chenoweth profiles individual schools based on test score data and her visits to each school and interviews with key stakeholders at the school. Many of the book's case studies of individual schools are available for free online, under "Success Stories" at http://www.achievementalliance.org/news/. The final chapter summarizes the commonalities among these successful schools.

In Why Students Don't Like School, cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham helps us become more sympathetic to students by describing how inefficient the brain can be at learning. Consider how much better our brains are at the complex operations of seeing and at moving our bodies. Our brains do them instantaneously and effortlessly. Thinking, by contrast, is slow, painstaking and unreliable. Willingham explains the role that working memory and emotions play in learning and ends its chapter with implications and practical suggestions for the classroom.

Four of the eight books perceived to be the decade's best were published in 2009 or 2010. Only one book was from the first half of the decade—In Schools We Trust (2002) by Deborah Meier. The author writes that to meet the needs of children, schools must build communities of learning. Schools must be smaller, more self-governed and places of choice, so kids and their families feel they are truly part of these communities. Teachers need time and space to develop collegial relations with each other. According to Meier, standardized testing is either irrelevant to academic excellence or an actual deterrent to learning.

The theory of disruptive innovation, originally outlined in the blockbuster, The Innovator's Dilemma, lays the groundwork for Disrupting Class. Christensen, a leading business strategist and Harvard Business School professor, explains how entire industries can be overturned and revolutionized by the introduction of a single, new technology.

Recognizing the need for a system-wide upheaval, Christensen and his co-authors say that only a revolutionary change can “disrupt” the flawed educational system and set American students on the path to achievement. New technology that supports customized instruction is the disruptive innovation that is needed, according to the book, and charter schools are a setting that accommodate this innovation.

In 1988, the Chicago public school system decentralized, giving parents and communities significant resources and authority to reform their schools. The authors of Organizing Schools for Improvement collected a wealth of data on elementary schools in Chicago over a 7-year period identifying 100 elementary schools that had substantially improved and 100 that had not.

The book identifies a comprehensive set of practices and conditions that were key factors for improvement, including school leadership, the professional capacity of the faculty and staff, and a student-centered learning climate. In addition, they analyze the links between schools and their communities.

Books on the original list of 41 received many votes as well but if they got less than 2.5% of votes they are not included on this short list. As with any internet poll, the end results may also reflect voting campaigns.

To manage principals, keep focus on competencies of job, study says

Busy superintendents and district administrators often send principals an implicit message about how they will be supervised: “Do your job and I won’t bother you unless something goes wrong.”

In the current era of principal accountability, that hands-off approach no longer works, says a recent article in AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice. It’s important to keep the principal focused on results and improvement while steering away from negativity and criticism. The article describes an updated version of an oft-cited management approach that is described by B.M. Harris and B.J. Monk in their book, Personnel administration in education (1992).

Desired competencies

This approach depersonalizes performance reviews by directing the attention of the supervisor and principal to the “desired competencies” of the position rather than to the strengths and weaknesses of the principal. The authors developed an updated version of this 3-step process to reflect the current emphases on the use of data and standards and on building partnerships.

The 3-step process as originally described is as follows:

• Determine the competencies desired
• Describe the expected performance in terms of the desired competencies
• Make judgments or decisions based on the closeness of fit between the desired and described leadership competencies.

The updated version of the model has 4 steps:

• Create and maintain a supervisory relationship based on trust
• Determine the competencies desired from research-based leadership standards
• Describe performance in terms of the desired competencies by collecting data using multi-dimensional approaches
• Make judgments and decisions based on the closeness of fit between the standards and principal performance as supported by the data

“Interpersonal trust is the glue of day-to-day life in the supervisory partnership between a principal and evaluator,” the researchers write. “Trust is also a necessary foundation in evaluation, a process laden with emotional overtones and risks.”

For administrators who are interested in working with this management approach, the researchers write, the first step is for the supervisor to accept the philosophy that evaluation is most effective when it takes place in the context of collaboration, trust, and respect.


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Child development research center reviews 38 after-school social skills programs

As many educators know, a child’s social skills are as important as intellectual skills in determining his or her success in school and later on in life.

Many schools informally teach children social skills in the classroom. Others adopt more formal and structured programs to teach skills such as getting along with others, expressing empathy, resolving conflicts and regulating emotions and behaviors.

To help schools that are unwilling to devote the already packed school day to developing social skills and to help those schools seeking to supplement current efforts, Child Trends reviewed 38 rigorously evaluated social skills programs for children and adolescents that operate out of school time.

Of the reviewed programs, 6 are community-based and 32 are school-based. The programs were drawn from Child Trends’ database of 500 evaluations of out-of-school-time programs called LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully). Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children at all stages of development.

“Overall, most (27 out of 38) of the program interventions that targeted positive social skills or measured impacts on social skills worked; that is, they significantly increased at least one social skill in children or adolescents,” write the researchers.

Based on the research evaluations, Child Trends placed the programs in 3 categories: “proven to work”, “mixed reviews” and “not proven to work”.

The 24 programs that were “proven to work” showed positive outcomes that persisted at 1-year follow-up. The 10 programs in the “mixed reviews” category showed some benefit, but either the positive outcomes didn’t persist at 1-year follow-up or they were only found to benefit 1 group, such as boys not girls, for example. The 4 programs that were classified as “not proven to work” had statistically non-significant or marginally significant impacts on social skills.

Found to be most consistently successful were programs that teach problem-solving skills, according to the Child Trends review. Students who participated in all 6 programs that focused on problem-solving skills had positive outcomes that persisted at one-year follow-up.

Multiple skills programs effective

Programs that target multiple skills (for example, self-regulation skills, problem solving skills, and conflict resolution skills) were also found to be effective. Seven of 8 of the programs targeting multiple skills were among the 24 in the “proven to work” category.

The duration of the effective programs varied widely and so did the instructional techniques, which included cognitive behavioral interventions, lecture-based programs, computer-based programs, etc., according to the Child Trends review.

Researchers report that parent involvement was often effective in programs targeted for elementary school children just as involving peers was often effective in programs targeted for middle school students and adolescents.

“The results from this Fact Sheet suggest, in general, that intervention programs that target social skills have positive impacts. More importantly, our findings suggest that a variety of strategies and practices can be used to promote social skills,” the researchers write.

To see the list of programs reviewed by Child Trends go to:


High school teacher reports on experience integrating cell phones in pre-calculus class

A high school math teacher, who appreciates the cons as well as the pros of integrating technology into the classroom, recently reported on his experiences with the student use of cell phones in a high school pre-calculus course.

One of the key decisions for teachers who want to use cell phones is to select a few roles for the cell phone from the dizzying array of possibilities, write George Engle, a teacher at Clarkstown High School South in West Nyack, NY, and co-author, Tim Green, professor of educational technology at California State University at Fullerton, CA, in TechTrends.

In this pilot program, cell phones were used in the classroom in 3 major ways:
• As an audience response system (polling)
• as a research tool
• as a tool for collecting evidence of student work through photographs and video recordings

“These three uses were selected because we felt they would help ease in the use of the devices in a manageable way while at the same time engaging students and allowing them to use the various capabilities of the devices to enhance their learning,” the researchers write.

Polling was the most common use in the classroom. Students got immediate feedback on polling questions, and the function allowed the teacher to immediately adjust lessons to address weaknesses in student learning. The teacher could check for understanding at the beginning and at the end of the lesson.

Polling responses were collected at both www.wiffiti.com and www.polleverywhere.com. Both these sites allow for the collection of anonymous responses from students.

“This anonymity has the potential to level the playing field among students by giving the shy student or reluctant student the opportunity to participate,” write the researchers. “The students reported enjoying the anonymity, and looked forward to sharing their ideas with the class and reading their classmates’ responses.”

Administrators express a variety of concerns about use of cell phones in the classroom, including inappropriate use of the devices by students, objections from parents who pay the cell phone bills, and questions about how to accommodate students who do not have cell phones or don’t have the most up-to-date cell phones.

Here are some of the researchers’ observations about these thorny issues:

Lack of access to cell phones. There was one student in the class of 18 male and female students in the class who did not have a cell phone. The student, Aaron, also had limited Internet access at home. “Students like Aaron exist in most classrooms and must be taken into consideration when using cell phones or other mobile technologies,” the researchers write. To participate in the polling activities, Aaron used a school-provided iPod with the Text Plus application that allows users to submit SMS texts like any cell phone. A wireless access point was installed in the classroom to serve this purpose.

In classrooms that do not have a wireless access point, other options for students who do not have a cell phone include writing the response on a card and handing it to the teacher or using another student’s cell phones. Obviously, these are far from ideal alternatives.

To meet the requirements for projects and wiki assignments, Aaron was only required to comment on other students’ posts on the wiki, the researchers report. Instead of posting on the wiki, he handwrote or typed his comments and submitted them for review. The work was collected and included in a portfolio.

“We found this to be a good alternative for him as it kept him involved and showed his growth throughout the year,” the researchers write.
Integrating cell phones into a high school class

Inappropriate use of devices. At the beginning of the school year, teacher and students set rules together so the students would share ownership of the rules. A few simple rules were established: (a) students should only use SMS texts for class work, (b) texts should be respectful and relevant to the discussion and (c) cell phones should only be visible when needed to complete classroom activities.

Teacher and students also discussed the possibility of inappropriate comments with anonymous polling. The teacher needs to build trust with the students that they will not engage in inappropriate comments during the class activities.

Parent support and approval. The principal sent a letter to parents seeking permission for their children to use cell phones in the classroom. Parents were told they would not have to change their cell phone plan in order for their children to participate. Students would have to use the SMS text, video and digital camera functions of their cell phones.

An information session was held with the parents the first week of school to discuss the program and to answer their questions. Although most parents had a favorable opinion of the pilot, 2 parents withdrew students from the class. One parent had concerns about excessive texting and another believed the technology components of the course made homework more time-consuming.

“The more information parents have about who, when, where, and why the devices will be used the more likely they will be in support of their use,” the researchers write. “A letter home and an informational session are great ways to get parents engaged and inform them.”

Besides using cell phones for polling purposes, students also used cell phones in class to research new math concepts on the Internet, helping to convert them from passive to active learners. For example, when students were introduced to the concept of matrices, their first reaction was to mention the popular movie, “Matrix.” The students had no idea how a matrix might apply to mathematics. They worked in small collaborative groups to research how matrices applied to mathematics.

The students shared the information they found with the class through texting, allowing for a rich discussion of the new topic. Students who did not have phones with Internet capabilities were able to use iPod touches with the installation of a wireless access point in the class.

The third role of cell phones in class was to allow students to take pictures or videos of their work and upload them on Flickr (www.flickr.com) and a class wiki. Students with cell phones that did not have a good camera function could use digital cameras.

Once images were posted, students were asked to reflect on their work on the wiki. They were also asked to provide peer review. Students commented on at least 2 of their classmates’ work, helping the reviewer and the peer to increase their understanding of the material. Later in the school year, students created videos with their phones or other recording devices. In their reflections on their work, some students said talking about their work on the videos helped them better understand the material.

What were the positive effects of cell phone use in the classroom? The researchers say there was an increase in class participation during the pilot program. Students were able to use their phones either to comment on the lesson, to answer questions, or to participate in research. There was also an increase in the quality of assessments. Students were able to prove their understanding through their wiki projects and on class tests. They also learned to reflect on their work.

According to the researchers, after recording a video for the class on rational functions, one student wrote, ‘By describing all the steps as I went along it helped me to better remember the steps.’
**Integrating cell phones into a high school class**

The program will be expanded to all of the classes of one of the authors. More instructional activities will be used with the phone and other faculty members will be trained in bringing the technology into their own classrooms, the researchers report.


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**Is gender inequality in classroom less of an issue in high school than in early grades?**

Whether they know it or not, teachers often fall into the trap of paying more attention to boys than girls in school, according to many studies on gender inequality in the classroom.

But, according to two British researchers, this unequal treatment may be a problem in primary school but it doesn’t seem to be an issue at the secondary school level.

When researchers Alex Harrop and Jeremy Swinson conducted a study of how teachers related to boys and girls at the primary school level a few years ago, they found that teachers interacted more with boys. But when they recently replicated the study with 20 secondary school teachers from 2 schools, they found no statistically significant differences in teachers’ behaviors towards the students, says a report in *Educational Studies*.

“In the secondary school, there is little difference between approval (to academic and social behaviour) directed to the two genders, whereas in the primary school boys received considerably more,” the researchers write. “The primary school pattern of boys receiving both more approval and disapproval than the girls has not been repeated in the secondary school.”

Both studies used classroom observations to record 6 types of interactions between teachers and students:

1. **Questioning**: Teacher: Asking a pupil a question that requires an answer, rather than a rhetorical question.
2. **Instructions and redirections**: Teachers instructing pupils about what is required of them either physically (“Please line up over there, open your books”) or mentally (“Just think carefully before you answer).
3. **Approval for academic behavior**: Any positive teacher response relating to reading, writing, listening and answering questions.
4. **Disapproval for academic behavior**: Any teacher response suggesting a rebuke such as “Be quiet” stop that during academic activities.
5. **Approval for social behavior**: Any positive teacher response relating to classroom manners, following classroom rules and routines such as remaining seated, putting hands up in answer to a general question to the class, lining up in an orderly fashion when requested.
6. **Disapproval for social behavior**: Any teacher response suggesting a rebuke for following classroom rules and routines.

Each lesson was observed for 45 minutes and was carried out by trained undergraduate students. Each observer was individually trained to use the schedule with the lead researcher until observer agreement reached a minimum of 85%.

Researchers noted that boys received more questions than girls and more disapproval for academic and social behavior in both primary school and secondary school, but the difference
Gender inequality in the classroom

in secondary school was not statistically significant. In secondary school, the girls received more instructions and redirections than boys, whereas it was the opposite in primary school. In secondary school, boys and girls received virtually identical proportions of approval for academic behavior while in primary school, the boys received significantly more, the researchers report. Their results may differ from the results of other studies because they observed a range of classes while some studies focused on science classes, they note.

During class observations, students’ off-task and on-task behaviors were also 6 times during the lesson. In elementary school, the girls were considerably more on-task than the boys but there was little difference in secondary school.

The methodology of this study included careful definition of the behaviors observed, the use of 2 independent observers, calculations of observer agreement and evidence that observer agreement exceeded chance levels.

“Comparison of teacher talk directed to boys and girls and its relationship to their behavior in secondary and primary schools,” by Alex Harrop and Jeremy Swinson, Educational Studies, Volume 37, Number 1, February 2011, pps. 115-125.

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