



The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling (Studies in Postwar American Political Development)

Jal Mehta

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Ted Kennedy and George W. Bush agreed on little, but united behind the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Passed in late 2001, it was hailed as a dramatic new departure in school reform. It would make the states set high standards, measure student progress, and hold failing schools accountable. A decade later, NCLB has been repudiated on both sides of the aisle. According to Jal Mehta, we should have seen it coming. Far from new, it was the same approach to school reform that Americans have tried before.

In *The Allure of Order*, Mehta recounts a century of attempts at revitalizing public education, and puts forward a truly new agenda to reach this elusive goal. Not once, not twice, but three separate times—in the Progressive Era, the 1960s and '70s, and NCLB-reformers have hit upon the same idea for remaking schools. Over and over again, outsiders have been fascinated by the promise of scientific management and have attempted to apply principles of rational administration from above. Each of these movements started with high hopes and ambitious promises, but each gradually discovered that schooling is not easy to "order" from afar: policymakers are too far from schools to know what they need; teachers are resistant to top-down mandates; and the practice of good teaching is too complex for simple external standardization.

The larger problem, Mehta argues, is that reformers have it backwards: they are trying to do on the back-end, through external accountability, what they should have done on the front-end: build a strong, skilled and expert profession. Our current pattern is to draw less than our most talented people into teaching, equip them with little relevant knowledge, train them minimally, put them in a weak welfare state, and then hold them accountable when they predictably do not achieve what we seek. What we want, Mehta argues, is the opposite approach which characterizes top-performing educational nations: attract strong candidates into teaching, develop relevant and usable knowledge, train teachers extensively in that knowledge, and support these efforts through a strong welfare state.

The Allure of Order boldly challenges conventional wisdom with a sweeping, empirically rich account of the last century of education reform, and offers a new path forward for the century to come.

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