

## Book Review

Henig, J.R., Hula, R.C., Orr, M. & Pedescleaux, D.S. 1999. *The Color of School Reform*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 301 pages. ISBN 0-691-01634-8 (hardcover, \$35.00).

For many years, the issue of how to reform and improve public schools in inner city areas within the large metropolitan areas of the United States has been a topic of controversy and intense debate among educational professionals, business leaders, politicians, journalists, and scholars. Inner-city schooling has long been regarded as inadequate, and proponents of reform have pointed to decades of low standardized test scores, high dropout rates, deteriorating physical plants, dissatisfied and unqualified teachers, and violent crime as evidence that inner-city schools have failed. Political controversy has been enhanced by the fact that a large majority of inner-city school children are non-white. School vouchers, charter schools, and corporate or non-profit control of inner-city schools by persons not connected with formal public schooling have been advocated and in some cases attempted, with varying degrees of success.

In *The Color of School Reform*, four well-known political scientists examine the question of inner-city school reform in the context of changes in the political structure of urban areas in the United States. They examine the school systems of four large cities-Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and Washington. All of these cities have African-American population majorities, and African-American mayors and other leaders including Andrew Young, Kurt Schmoke, Coleman Young, and Marion Barry have dominated each city's politics for the past three decades. Moreover, in all four cities the school superintendents and substantial majorities of teachers, principals, and other administrators are African-Americans. Thus Henig *et al.* pose the question of whether the emergence of African-American political power in these cities "has complicated or facilitated the development of civic capacity to undertake and sustain educational reforms that will help low-income and minority children" (6). In examining this question, Henig *et al.* seek to address it in the larger context of whether meaningful school reform is possible. They answer this question by arguing that understanding school reform is only feasible through understanding the politics underlying any viable proposals to reform public education.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter, "Civic Capacity, Race, and Education in Black-Led Cities," sets forth the research agenda addressed in the book. Pointing out that "some communities [are] able to undertake and sustain systemic educational initiatives while others

settle for shallow or symbolic efforts or deplete their energies in brief spasms of reform that do not take root" (14), Henig *et al.* define the term "civic capacity" in order to measure the extent to which various sectors in a community, including professional educators, politicians, business leaders, students, and the general public, are able to work together to formulate common objectives and pursue and achieve common goals.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide historical context for the measurement of civic capacity. In Chapter 2, the authors describe the demographic, economic, and political changes that led to the rise of African-American political power in each of the four cities. It considers the impact of school desegregation policy following the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, along with the impacts of the Civil Rights Movement and the consequent rise of African-American political consciousness and activity which followed. Chapter 3 is devoted to the history of schooling and school reform in the four cities, and it describes attempts to combat the endemic problems that have long plagued school reform efforts in each city.

Chapters 4 through 7 deal with the role played by each of four major interest groups whose input is critical to meaningful school reform: teachers, parents, political and business leaders, and external actors including the state and Federal governments, the courts, private foundations, and suburban residents and leaders. In each of these chapters, Henig *et al.* spell out the interests of each of these groups, describing why efforts to persuade their members to become an ongoing part of the "civic capacity" of their cities have been less than fully successful. For example, civic capacity has been eroded by tensions between black political leaders and the white-dominated business community. These tensions are in part the result of sharp differences between business leaders and educational professionals concerning the nature and value of public education. In their words, "In black-led cities there appears to be a substantial conflict between business and nonbusiness actors over the priority given to the schools' role as provider of basic work-related skills versus an expanded version as provider of social services..." (230). The final chapter, entitled "School Reform as if Politics and Race Matter," summarizes the book's arguments and draws conclusions about the possible future of urban education. They conclude that citizen participation and commitment are a vital component of civic capacity, and that successful reform of inner-city schools will require a high degree of civic capacity in light of modest financial resources, political tension and fragmentation, and mistrust among the various actors who must work together in order to achieve any reform that is truly meaningful.

*The Color of School Reform* is an excellent book. It is thoroughly researched, thought provoking, and well written. Yet it does not deal explicitly

with themes usually associated with the geographic education literature. Why should the complex and seemingly intractable issues addressed in the book be of particular interest to experts in geographic education? First, the book is a significant contribution to the literature on the geography of education-an important subject that should be of increasing interest to the geographic education community. Geographical analysis is central to our understanding of the origin and resolution of political and racial disputes in the provision of education, and to our ability to predict meaningfully the conditions under which reform proposals in the future may work. Perhaps even more importantly, specialists in geographic education-that is, those who have devoted their professional lives to understanding the processes and structures of teaching and learning geography-have much to contribute to improving inner-city schools. The national reform movement in geographic education has done much to raise the public's awareness of the importance of geography as a school subject in the twenty-first century. Citizenship in the twenty-first century will demand even higher levels of geographic literacy and awareness, especially in inner cities with their long history of poverty, crime, and deprivation. Geographic literacy-not only knowing where places are, but even more importantly how the geographer perceives, maps, and understands the world-will be crucial to our continued efforts to combat poverty, racism, and poor schooling in America's inner cities and elsewhere.

Finally, civic capacity as Henig *et al.* define it depends also on geographic awareness. Henig *et al.* contend that civic awareness and responsibility are critical components of civic capacity and its relationship to meaningful school reform. If so, then the discipline of geography can and must be critical to the achievement and maintenance of civic capacity. Specialists in geographic education will do well to read *The Color of School Reform* and to consider in a meaningful way how geographic education can contribute to the difficult and complex, but by no means insurmountable problem of how to reform inner-city schooling in a meaningful way.

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