

EDUCATION 299
The History of American School Reform
Fall 2014
W/F 12:30-1:45pm

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Course Description

Most Americans believe that school reform is easy.

But consider the implications. If school reform is easy, then why do so many schools fall short? Is it because policymakers are ignorant? Is it because teachers are recalcitrant? Is it because politics rule the day?

OK. So school reform is impossible.

But if that is the case, then how is it that schools have improved so much over the past 300 years?

This course will explore the history of school reform in the United States. And particularly, it will explore the paradox of educational improvement: school reform is impossible; school reform happens.

In a single semester, we will not be able to pursue a systematic study of this history from beginning to end. Instead, we will explore a few major themes and several key reform movements—progressivism, desegregation, standards and accountability, and school choice, among them—to consider their consequences. Focusing on the twentieth century, and on the high school, we will examine the role of education in American society, the various and often competing goals of school reformers, and the dynamics of educational change. Ultimately, the course asks a simple question: why has so much reform produced so little change?

Course Expectations

1. Readings: Do the assigned readings prior to class discussions and be prepared to ask and answer questions in class. As a rule of thumb, shorter readings should be read more slowly and more carefully than longer ones.

2. Participation in class: Participation in discussions, group work, and email is important in this class as a way of deepening your understanding of the main ideas of the course and practicing key skills. Useful contributions take a number of forms—building on the comments of others, bringing new points to light, raising questions, carefully listening—but are common in that they foster an environment of discovery. In short, your participation is not merely as an *individual*, but as a *member of a whole*; bear that in mind. Attendance is a requirement; missing more than two classes will require instructor consent.

3. Writing: We will focus a great deal on writing in this class, and you will be asked to complete several different kinds of assignments over the semester. This emphasis on writing reflects the discipline—all historians are also writers by trade. Additionally, however, it is designed as a service to you, because writing is so essential in the world beyond college, and because instruction around writing is often so inconsistent. For much more detail, see the Guidelines for Analytical Writing at the end of the syllabus.

*While you will not be explicitly evaluated on these course expectations, failure to meet them will adversely affect your ability to fully contribute as a member of the class and, consequently, your grade. Meeting 75% of expectations, in other words, roughly translates to a C.

Grading and Assignments

Your course grade will be broken down into the following categories:

1. Op-ed Assignment: 15%
2. Leading Class Discussion: 10%
3. Two Analytical Essays: 45%
4. Final Project: 30%

All assignments should be single-spaced and emailed as MS Word attachments.

*Late work for all assignments will be graded down one-third of a grade (i.e. A→A-) for each day it is past due.

1. **Op-ed assignment**

For this assignment, write a double-spaced 700-800 word op-ed (check out the op-ed page of the *New York Times* or the “Commentary” section of *Education Week* if you aren’t familiar with the genre) about how to improve American schools.

In this, lay out clearly what kinds of schools you are addressing (urban, rural, elementary, high schools, etc.), where you see those schools falling short, what it would take to turn that school or district into a “successful” one, and, what signs or indicators would convince parents, taxpayers, and policymakers that your school or district is “successful.”

Please DO NOT read any assigned texts for this first assignment. Just sit down and think through what you believe and apply your knowledge, beliefs, and values to this piece of writing. There is a reason we are doing this assignment at the beginning of the course.

This op-ed will receive a letter grade for the quality of writing and the degree to which you met the requirements of the assignment. The grade does not evaluate your interpretation of how to improve schools. All papers must be submitted by email as an MS Word attachment.

You may rewrite this paper at any time for a revised grade, or simply because you want to.

2. **Leading class discussion**

Each student is responsible for guiding a portion of class discussion during one of our meetings. You may work alone for this or with a partner, and you may choose which of the meetings you wish to lead. This will be decided on a first-come, first-serve basis. You will be evaluated on your ability to identify major issues and themes in the readings, the depth of your questions, your ability to effectively draw-out student response, and the way in which you connect student comments together to produce a coherent string of dialogue. Questions about your particular work on this assignment can be discussed during office hours.

3. **Analytical essays** (roughly 1500 words each)

These essays are your chance to write about anything you want (well...almost anything).

Start with this: what has interested you so far? Look back at readings and reflect on discussions. What was interesting to you? What was infuriating? What did an author inadequately argue? How have new readings shaped the way you think about previous readings?

After settling on a topic, you want to think about what you have to say about it. What might you say that is new, interesting, provocative, troubling, or problematic?

Then you'll want to gather evidence. What readings can you use? What from class discussions can you draw on? How does real life compare with what were are reading?

Key in this assignment will be avoiding summary. Instead, you should concentrate on making a point about the texts that enhances or complicates our understanding of a particular issue. You should have a central argument/key observation that you then substantiate with evidence from course readings. Be sure that your central argument is at the core of your essay and that you cut out everything extraneous to that core argument.

You will be evaluated on the criteria laid out in the "Guidelines" section at the end of the syllabus. Read it. Read it twice. Read it three times.

4. Final project

For this project, you will be expert historians working to root out foolishness in contemporary policy debates.

More specifically, you will be working in teams of two or three to address the uses and abuses of history in education:

- How is history used in education reform conversations?
- How is the past accurately presented?
- How is it distorted?
- What appears to be the purpose of drawing upon the past?
- What is problematic about such uses?
- What is important?

A. Your first task is to assemble a group. This project is a large-scale endeavor, and will require a team of 2-3 individuals working together. We will form groups in class.

B. Your next task is to look at your assigned text. You will be working with one of the following three:

1. Chester Finn's article "Beyond the School District":

<http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/beyond-the-school-district>

2. Chapter 2 from Paul Peterson's book *Saving Schools*.

<http://content.hks.harvard.edu/savingschools/>

3. Sal Khan's video history of American education at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=LqTwDDTjb6g

C. Next, your task will be to analyze how history is being used in your text. What are readers/viewers being led to believe about the role of the past? How does the portrayal of the past present a particular picture of the present? How accurate is that message? In order to gauge accuracy, you will need to figure out what actually happened in the past. That will bring you to step D.

D. Find a book, book chapter, or article that deals chiefly with the history or historical event in question. You will probably want to find multiple sources. Consider: how does this story—emerging from these historical sources—align with the picture of the past being presented in your text from step B? Do they tell a different story? A more complicated story? A less interesting story? The exact same story?

E. Finally, you will want to figure out what this all means. What can you say generally about the usefulness of history in current policy debates? What can you say generally about the abuses of history?

- F. Your final product will be a report that includes (at the minimum) the following items:
- An overview of how those writing or speaking about your topic use history (along with examples)
 - An overview of how historians tend to address that topic (along with examples)
 - An analysis of differences and similarities between treatments of the past (explaining what this reveals about the uses and abuses of history)
 - Robust evidence supporting any and all claims
 - An appendix in which you describe the methodology and tools used in conducting this study
 - Description of work distribution in the group

Other details: your report should be no longer than 7 pages exclusive of endnotes and appendices (12-point size type and single-spaced).

You will be making final presentations to the class. Plan on 30 minutes. Be prepared for questions. All group members should participate in a way that reflects their contributions. This will count for 10% of your total project grade.

Course Overview

All readings for the course will be provided on Moodle. They should be downloaded prior to class and brought either as printouts or on a PDF reader like the Kindle. If you use electronic copies, make sure that you choose software that enables you to annotate your readings—not only because it is good practice, but also because it will better enable you to participate in class discussions.

Week 1: How do reforms of the past affect the present?

Readings from Mary Metz; Excerpt from *Tinkering toward Utopia* (Tyack and Cuban)

Week 2: Local Governance Reforms of the Past and Present:

Local Control; District Consolidation; Community Control; Mayoral Control

Week 3: State and Federal Governance Reforms of the Past and Present:

Constitution; State Oversight; ESEA; NCLB

Week 4: Enrollment Reforms of the Past and Present:

Compulsory Schooling; Desegregation; Choice

Week 5: Personnel Reforms of the Past and Present

Teacher Licensure; Teacher Training; Unions; Teach For America

Week 6: Sociocultural Reforms of the Past and Present

Catholic Education; Bilingual Education; Afrocentric Education

Week 7: NO CLASS

Week 8: Curricular Reforms of the Past and Present

Early Textbooks; Committee of 10; Cardinal Principles; Life Adjustment; Common Core

Week 9: Assessment Reforms of the Past and Present

Early Testing; SAT; The Accountability Movement; Value-Added

Week 10: Funding Reforms of the Past and Present

Mandatory Taxation; State Funding; ESEA; Sufficiency Funding

Week 11: Social Services Reforms of the Past and Present

Hull House; EAHC; Compensatory Education; Broader Bolder Approach

Week 12: Higher Education Reforms of the Past and Present

Yale Report; German Research Universities; Multiversity; Chicano Studies; Obama Plan

Week 13: Thinking about Reform

Readings from James C. Scott and Rory Stewart

Week 14: In-Class Work with Primary Documents

Week 15: Final Presentations

Guidelines

Guidelines for Critical Reading

As a critical reader of a particular text (a book, article, speech, proposal), you should to use the following questions as a framework to guide you as you read:

1. What's the point? This is the analysis issue: what is the author's angle?
2. Who says? This is the validity issue: on what are the claims based?
3. What's new? This is the value-added issue: what does the author contribute that we don't already know?
4. Who cares? This is the significance issue, the most important issue of all, the one that subsumes all the others: is the text worth reading? Does it contribute something important?

If this is the way critical readers are going to approach a text, then as an analytical writer you need to guide readers toward the desired answers to each of these questions.

Guidelines for Analytical Writing

In writing papers for this (or any) course, keep in mind the following points.

1. Pick an important issue: make sure that your analysis meets the “so what” test. Why should anyone care about this topic? Pick an issue or issues that matters and that you really care about.
2. Provide analysis: a good paper is more than a catalogue of facts, concepts, experiences, or references; it is more than a description of the content of a set of readings. A good paper is a logical and coherent analysis of the key issue(s) related to your theme. This means that your paper should aim to *explain* rather than describe.
3. Keep focused: don't lose track of the point you are trying to make and make sure the reader knows where you are heading and why. Cut out anything extraneous to your main point.
4. Aim for clarity: don't assume that the reader knows what you're talking about; it's your job to make your points clearly. In part this means keeping focused and avoiding distracting clutter. Proceed as though you were writing for an educated person who has not read the material you are referring to.
5. Provide depth, insight, and connections: the best papers are ones that go beyond making obvious points, superficial comparisons, and simplistic assertions. They dig below the surface of the issue at hand, demonstrating a deeper level of understanding and an ability to make interesting connections.
6. Support your analysis with evidence: you need to do more than simply state your ideas, however informed and useful these may be. You also need to provide evidence that reassures the reader that you know what you are talking about, thus providing a foundation for your argument. Remember that you are trying to accomplish two things with the use of evidence. First, you are saying that it is not just you making this assertion but that authoritative sources and solid evidence back you up. Second, you are supplying a degree of specificity and detail, which helps to flesh out an otherwise skeletal argument.
7. Draw on course materials. Your papers should give evidence that you are taking this course. You do not need to agree with any of the readings or presentations, but your paper should show you have considered the course materials thoughtfully.
8. Recognize complexity and acknowledge multiple viewpoints. You should not reduce issues to either/or, black/white, good/bad. Papers should give evidence that you understand and appreciate more than one perspective on an issue.
9. Do not overuse quotation: in a short paper, long quotations (more than a sentence or two in length) are generally not appropriate. Even in longer papers, quotations should be used sparingly unless they constitute a primary form of data for your analysis. In general, your papers are more effective if written primarily in your own words, using ideas from the literature but framing them in your own way in order to serve your own analytical purposes. However, selective use of

quotations can be very useful as a way of capturing the author's tone or conveying a particularly aptly phrased point.

10. Cite your sources: You need to identify for the reader where particular ideas or examples come from. This can be done through in-text citation: give the author's last name, publication year, and (in the case of quotations) page number in parentheses at the end of the sentence or paragraph where the idea is presented—e.g., (Schneider, 2011, p. 22); provide the full citations in a list of references at the end of the paper. You can also identify sources with footnotes or endnotes: give the full citation for the first reference to a text and a short citation for subsequent citations to the same text.

11. Take care in the quality of your prose: a paper that is written in a clear and effective style makes a more convincing argument than one written in a murky manner, even when both writers start with the same basic understanding of the issues. However, writing that is confusing usually signals confusion in a person's thinking. After all, one key purpose of writing is to put down your ideas in a way that permits you and others to reflect on them critically, to see if they stand up to analysis. So you should take the time to reflect on your own ideas on paper and revise them as needed.