

Book Review

Cuban, Larry. *As Good As It Gets: What School Reform Brought to Austin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 304 pp. Hardcover \$25.95.

Preuss, Gene B. *To Get a Better School System: One Hundred Years of Education Reform in Texas*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009. 152 pp. Cloth \$34.95.

The influence of Texas on federal education policy in the past decade is unique. Much of the architecture of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is grounded in Texas school reform efforts; in addition, the needs of the diverse, bilingual student populations many Texas districts have long served will likely capture only more attention in federal policy in the future. And yet, aside from a handful of studies, the state largely has been ignored in education histories. Larry Cuban and Gene Preuss seek to fill that void with two books about the history of education reform in Austin and Texas, respectively.

Larry Cuban is an esteemed historian of education and policy expert, and *As Good As It Gets* brings together both worlds. The book argues that the best way to assess the current state of reform in most school districts is first to understand how we got here. Cuban focuses on Austin because with a 73 percent Mexican-American and African-American student population and its willingness to experiment with a broad range of governance-based reforms, the city is representative of many urban school districts. In both Austin's similarities and contrasts to other such districts, Cuban contends, we can understand the challenges that schools face nationwide.

The early history of Austin that Cuban traces is broad and fairly predictable. As early as the 1920s, the city's schools were segregated by Austin's three racial/ethnic populations: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and whites. As elsewhere in the nation, little was done to remedy this situation until the 1970s, when a Department of Justice Consent Order required the Austin Independent School District (AISD) to bus students, hire more minority staff, and offer bilingual programs. In 1986, the district court ruled Austin a unitary district and released it from the Order's stipulations. The end of court-ordered desegregation marked the beginning of a resegregation process, one that left Austin schools even more unbalanced than they were before. Cuban sees this moment as especially important, not just for what it meant for the demographic composition of local schools but for the finality it marked

for desegregation as a school reform policy. Today, a handful of districts nationwide have experimented with desegregation policies again, but most focus on accountability reforms and “improving excellence” within high-poverty, minority schools that are likely to remain such.

In Austin, this turn to accountability-based reform was enabled by the growing influence of state policy and the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Specifically, the TEA helped to create a culture of “testing, naming, and blaming” (p. 51) that was coupled with anti-union legislation and a general skepticism of teachers’ performance. Cuban views Austin’s response to these changes through a focus on the superintendents who played a critical role in translating policy into action. While Austin had only three superintendents between 1950 and 1990, it saw another three in the 1990s alone. The decade was also marked by mass principal resignations, charges of corruption and inflated test scores, and tense relationships between the Austin Board of Education and minority parent groups. Cuban’s account here is fascinating, and it might lead one to wonder to what degree these developments were created by a testing culture and the nature of TEA-led school reform itself. He does not explicitly say, but his response would be interesting to hear.

Cuban focuses most on Superintendent Larry Forgione (1999–2009), because he re-created a sense of stability within the schools and because he oversaw the implementation of so many of the reforms initiated by NCLB. Cuban concludes that Austin is “as good as it gets” in school reform not because all of its schools are successful but because under Forgione’s leadership, the system experimented with an array of reforms—including creating Professional Learning Communities for teachers, breaking large high schools into smaller sub-school communities, and allowing individual schools to focus on different methods of curriculum redesign—that produced mixed results. Yet while Cuban concludes that Forgione’s “hybrid strategy” of combining top-down and bottom-up reforms were a “reasonable fit for Austin schools,” he also found that by 2009, no one in the school system “could say with any confidence, beyond occasional stories heard ... what exactly had changed and what had remained the same” (p. 111). And this, he argues, is indicative of much of contemporary school reform, particularly governance-focused accountability reforms that can only be measured over long periods of time. We have startling little evidence or ability, Cuban argues, to show which NCLB-driven initiatives work, why they work, and whether and how policy actually comes to improve classroom pedagogy. Testing has only deepened inequities between high-performing schools and high-poverty, high-minority schools driven to teach to the test, and it has created a tension between the need to improve test scores and the desire to improve teaching and learning.

While this argument is familiar to anyone who follows school reform, Cuban's focus on the superintendency, and the connections he draws between policy, local school administration, and the classroom, constitute a clear and yet untold narrative of multiple interest groups and approaches to academic assessment, each of which individually are complex. History is usually overlooked by leaders in contemporary school reform, he persuasively argues, yet it only tells part of the story. If "history and demography were deterministic," he argues, schools in Austin, Dallas, Houston, and Brownsville might look similar. But they don't, and their differences can be grounded in "organizational structures, value-driven policies, and persistent problems of behavior" (p. 186). In his ability to engage multiple lenses and disciplinary methodologies to create this book, Cuban has written a work that will be relevant and helpful to a wide audience.

At times readers might require a more nuanced historical account than the one Cuban offers. I wonder still about the relationships between the city's three racial and ethnic groups and especially between its African-American and Mexican-American residents. What can those relationships tell us about the challenges and successes Austin's diverse schools have experienced in improving school quality? Cuban ends the book with five broad lessons he learned from studying Austin, including the need to monitor the academic effect of reforms more effectively, create higher standards for high-achieving schools, and expand school choice. Yet, these lessons remain less interesting and unique than his claim that he saw "no political will" among AISD administrators, parents, or the greater Austin public "to challenge the primacy of the neighborhood school and the existing high level of residential segregation" that he clearly sees as necessary for more effective school reform (p. 164). Why is this? And what might it take to create such political will, if that is a necessary goal? While Cuban's desire to make his findings accessible and relevant to a wide audience are admirable, hearing more about Austin, specifically, could have been equally helpful in the end.

Gene Preuss takes both a longer and geographically broader look at school reform in Texas, focusing especially on the historic inequities between urban and rural schools. Specifically, he is most interested in two historical moments that constituted major periods of change for rural schools in Texas: the Progressive era and World War II. The second half of the nineteenth century established many of the inequities with which school reformers would have to contend with for the next one hundred years. Rural students attended school for about half as many days as their urban counterparts, and rural teachers were paid less than urban teachers. These differences were enabled by laws that not only distributed tax funds differently but mandated different minimum

standards for the two kinds of schools. Black rural schools struggled even more than white ones, often depending on parents and private contributions for basic materials and supplies, including, at times, buildings in which to hold school. Similarly, Mexican-American students, who both did and did not attend schools with whites, were often ignored by white teachers who believed their Spanish-speaking parents lacked the ability to protest their children's unequal treatment.

School reform in the Progressive era came from many different corners and was encouraged by business leaders' conviction that the local workforce needed to become more skilled and the state needed to modernize. Annie Webb Blanton's and the Texas State Teacher Association's Better Schools Campaign successfully petitioned for increased local taxes and school funding. Governor Pappy O'Daniel campaigned for greater centralization via a state school superintendent and board of education. His plan drew massive resistance from urban and rural critics alike but nevertheless sparked an effort to create a more efficient and standard school system that teachers would maintain. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the state legislature passed laws mandating the statewide adoption of textbooks, the provision of free textbooks to all schools, the establishment of a common curriculum between urban and rural high schools, and the accessibility of grants for school districts offering vocational, agricultural, and home economics classes. By 1929, several compulsory education laws increased the length of the school year for all students. The period also marked a first wave of rural school consolidation in an effort to make rural education more cost-effective.

Preuss contrasts this wave of reform with another after World War II. Whereas Progressive reform in Texas still largely heralded the role of the rural school in the community, he argues, postwar reform was far more centralized and prioritized efficiency. Military qualification exams had revealed that three-quarters of Texans who failed their physicals had health problems rooted in malnutrition and that Texans exhibited an illiteracy rate double that of the national average. Clearly, many Progressive reform measures that had improved school programs in other parts of the nation had not reached Texas, particularly its rural schools. While several important court cases in the 1940s tested the state's segregated schools and deep inequities between white and minority teachers' salaries, the most influential source of reform came from the 1949 Gilmer-Aikin Laws, to which Preuss dedicates his final chapter. The state legislation covered many areas, from its contentious push for the consolidation of rural schools to further standardization of school curricula and school funding.

At first, the Gilmer-Aikin Laws appeared to reflect the same conservative, anti-New Deal beliefs held by many of its supporters,

including business leaders and conservative politicians. Some claimed it was just a way to oust the current state superintendent, who appeared to be friendly to minority education opportunity. But, in fact, in the early 1950s, it proved quite the opposite as it both raised and equalized teachers' salaries across race lines, created financial support for more teacher positions, and increased minority student enrollment and services for disabled students. Preuss concludes that in its effort to standardize Texas schools within the state and in the context of national standards, this understudied legislation marked a critical "step toward the goal of democratizing education" (p. 97).

Preuss' attention to a historic urban/rural divide and to the contrasts between these two periods of rural school reform cover important, uncharted ground and certainly will provide readers with a helpful entryway into Texas school history. But given its simultaneous breadth and brevity, the book is far less detailed—and at times less clearly argued—than Cuban's. In the end, Preuss frequently provides readers with a superficial glance at the major interest groups in school reform, including teachers, ordinary citizens, and civil rights groups and leaders, when it would have been helpful to hear more about any or all of these historical actors. While its focus on the Gilmer-Aikin Laws is the most detailed in the book, his contention that "much of [the legislation's] public support came from rural areas" suggests that rural Texans swiftly and unambiguously exchanged a historical dedication to localism for more funding (p. 95). On one level, this makes sense, but hearing more about such a significant change would have been interesting. I wondered, too, how Preuss might assess this legislation in light of the Texas history that would follow. He ends the book and his analysis in the 1950s, and yet the Gilmer-Aikin Laws likely hold further, unique relevance in light of contemporary school legislation and standardization efforts in Texas. These questions and gaps may represent the groundwork of a different book, but they merit attention nonetheless. The writer who chooses to address them will undoubtedly find Preuss' work a foundational start.