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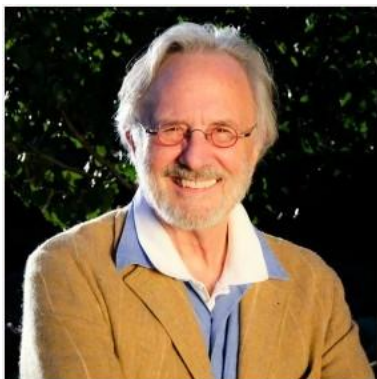
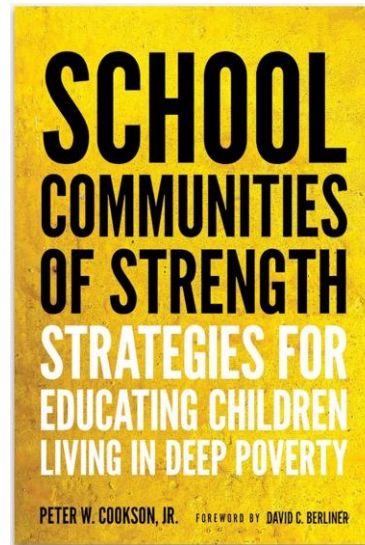
Cookson, P. W., Jr. (2024). *School communities of strength: Strategies for educating children living in deep poverty*. Teachers College Press.

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Peter W. Cookson, Senior Research Fellow at the Learning Policy Institute, has written a powerful critique of the American education system in *School Communities of Strength*. Cookson argues that systemic inequality in education perpetuates privilege and denies millions of children the right to learn and grow as persons. Rooted in his firsthand experience as a former teacher in a very low-income school, Cookson presents a strong case for restructuring schools as places of compassion, inclusion, and intellectual rigor for all students. As policy makers, educators, and districts argue issues of educational equity, funding disparities, and the role of schools in addressing social injustices, Cookson offers a well-developed and urgent contribution to long standing debates about how to create inclusive learning environments for *all* students. The book's theme, framework, and its relevance to contemporary educational debates, along with the impact of its suggested reforms within the broader historical moment, will be discussed in this review.



Cookson begins by highlighting the pervasive inequality we see in the American education system. He believes that privilege often blinds society to the suffering of children in deep poverty, making them “invisible in broad daylight.” Through personal accounts and experiences, he illustrates for us how deep the economic and racial disparities are that impact students’ access to quality education. He shares, “this book is dedicated to the proposition that no child should live on the outskirts of hope. All children have the right to be safe, to develop their talents, and to succeed” (p. 29) and that

“everyday millions of children are denied their right to learn and develop by a system of schools designed to reproduce privilege” (p. 29).

As Cookson notes, the field of education is inundated with ideas, fads, and fantasies about how to reform education, “Yet very little seems to change” (p. 64). The author outlines two primary design principles for school reform: first, creating communities of compassion, inclusion, and identity safety; and second, fostering intellectual excitement, rigor, and relevance. Cookson argues that schools should be rebuilt from the bottom up, while applying fact-based and conceptually sound policies. He introduces the reader to nine success strategies to achieve these goals, three of the most prominent being fostering deep human connections, embracing justice and democracy, and integrating comprehensive support systems for students.

Cookson goes on to critique traditional teacher preparation programs, emphasizing that compassion and relationship building are more critical than the extensive pedagogical training employed in most universities. He also addresses the importance of data-driven decision making in education, to advocate for more equitable (not equal) school funding and resource distribution. Schools should focus more on using school data to gain leverage and serve as a framework for real change.

Cookson employs a social justice and equity centered analytical framework, drawing on some contemporary research in education policy, psychology, and a little bit of economics. His argument is centered on the belief that systemic change must address the intersectionality of race, class, and economic status in shaping educational opportunities for all students. The book aligns with contemporary movements that advocate culturally responsive pedagogy, whole child learning approaches, and of course, anti-racist education policies.

An especially relevant application of Cookson’s ideas is the growth in community schools, which serve as community hubs that integrate social and mental health services and support the fight for more inclusive learning opportunities in public schools. His plea for equitable school funding is still seen today in recent legal battles and policy debates surrounding the allocation of resources in high poverty districts. Lastly, his critique of the school-to-prison pipeline aligns with current efforts to reform school disciplinary protocols and promote restorative justice practices and approaches for students. One of the book’s greatest strengths is its urgent and well-developed call to reform education with compassion and equity for all students. The argument that Cookson makes—relationships, not programs, change children—is encouraging and supported by research in developmental psychology. His highlighting of community schools and democratic pedagogy aligns with movements toward a more authentic and equitable education for the next generation. He also shares the power and responsibility that educators hold, stating

educators have been silenced for too long, this must end because educators have the power to transform society from the inside out. The time has come to listen to those who know what children need and have the energy and imagination to turn classrooms into oases of learning where all children belong. (p. 101)

However, at times, the book’s broad scope leads to superficial treatment rather than a deep dive in some areas. While Cookson effectively highlights several systemic

issues, his shared solutions, although inspiring, seem idealistic and in some cases impractical. For example, while advocating for increased funding for high poverty schools, he does not sufficiently address where exactly the money will be sourced or the political barriers to achieving this.

On the other hand, he develops a remarkable argument regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, which Cookson maintains begins as early as before first-grade. This claim is bold and underscores the urgency of early intervention in early childhood education. His argument that low expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies for students is well developed and reinforces the need for ambitious goal setting, regardless of students' socioeconomic or racial backgrounds.

Cookson's awareness of 21st century learning, which includes cultivating creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration, is especially relevant in today's rapidly changing world. He notes "the second dimension is learning. The formal learning in the way students learn, symbolized by authority-based, lecture-oriented schooling is rapidly becoming an educational fossil" (p. 90). Although he is right in the sense that education is rapidly changing, it is important to recognize that the immense challenges associated with implementing such radical changes in the current standardized test-driven education system we live in. While his discussion of the Finnish educational model and its emphasis on the whole-child learning is compelling, the book could definitely benefit from a more in-depth comparison between the American and Finnish systems.

The issues Cookson highlights have been the subject of reform movements for decades, from the War on Poverty in the 1960s to current debates about equitable funding in education. While progress has been made, especially with policies like Title I funding and a growing awareness of more well-rounded teaching approaches, systemic inequities persist.

Cookson's most significant contribution is his emphasis on relationships as the center of meaningful education reform. This perspective sets his work apart from other policy-centered approaches. His argument aligns with research in developmental psychology and aligns with thinkers who highlight the ethics of care in our education system. However, it is important to note that his approach sacrifices depth in some areas, particularly in addressing the systemic barriers to implementing his ideas. While his discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline is alarming, a more refined explanation of structural constraints could strengthen his case. The book's originality is in its comparison of historical reform attempts with present challenges, which offers a vision that looks to the future while also being rooted in past movements. Overall, in a field that is overwhelmed with constant calls for reform, Cookson's work stands out by making human relationships central, but its impact ultimately depends on bridging the gap between his broad vision and realistic policy solutions. This book serves as a powerful call to action: building on past efforts while pushing for new and transformative approaches to education equity today.

School Communities of Strength presents a well-developed argument for reimagining schools as places of equity and social justice. Cookson's vision of a compassionate, rigorous, and engaging education system is inspiring, though some of his proposed solutions may seem overly ambitious in practice. This aspirational approach may

leave some readers, myself included, wanting more concrete and detailed implementation strategies. Despite this, *School Communities of Strength* is a great resource that I would specifically recommend to educators, administrators, and policymakers who strive to address education disparities and want to create lasting change. Cookson's central message is clear: no child should be left on the margins of hope, and it is our shared responsibility to transform schools into spaces where all students can thrive.


About the Reviewer

Grace Morison graduated from Texas Christian University in 2023 with a degree in early childhood education and earned her master's in science education in 2024. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in education at Southern Methodist University. Passionate about shaping young minds and advancing educational research, she is committed to making a lasting impact in the field. Outside of academia, she enjoys running, traveling, attending church, and spending quality time with family and friends. Her drive for learning and connection fuels both her personal life and professional goals. gracemorison@tcu.edu




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