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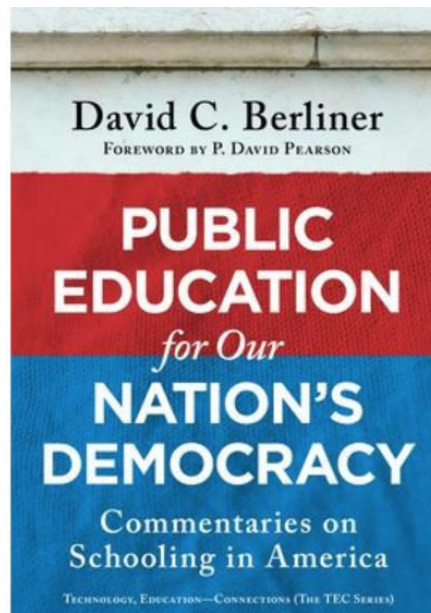
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David C. Berliner is well known as an original researcher—particularly in the areas of classroom observation and teacher expertise—and as a public intellectual who combines his own findings with wide-ranging secondary research and large-scale datasets to demonstrate how dominant narratives about public schools and testing are often misleading or harmful.

Berliner is a passionate advocate for the democratic way of life and for public education. In *The Manufactured Crisis*, co-authored with Bruce Biddell, he showed how widely circulated claims of failing schools rested on myths and misused evidence, while in *Collateral Damage* he documented how high-stakes testing distorts educational practice and undermines meaningful learning. Over the years, Berliner's spirited defense of public education has made him a lightning rod for critics. Some conservative and ultra-right attacks have gone far beyond scholarly disagreement, at times becoming personal and vitriolic. A few have even descended into anti-Semitic caricature.

In this new volume, *Public Education for Our Nation's Democracy: Commentaries on Schooling in America*, David C. Berliner turns to the personal essay. The 18 essays contained in this book reflect the same themes contained in his scholarship, but the essay form permits him to step beyond the role of social scientist and show himself as a morally engaged—and at times morally outraged—citizen. Written in a distinctive style, by turns humorous and ironic, these essays restate his urgent concerns about democratic life and public education in our time.

A few examples demonstrate Berliner's insights about and loving care for young people.



In essay 1, *A Hug for Jennifer*, Berliner sees a child, Alec, apparently “ignored” and even “shunned” by his teacher and classmates. Outraged, he confronts the teacher after school. She explains that Alec’s brother had been killed by police the night before. She had told him he need not participate, and had asked the other children to give him space for his grief. Humbled by her wisdom, Berliner spontaneously reaches out to hug her. Always the social scientist, he concludes by noting that “raw observation” is a poor method; if you don’t know what is going on, your observations are distorted and worthless (p. 4).

In essay 2, *Teachers Teach—It’s What They Do*, Berliner recalls losing his beloved wife, Ursula Casanova, a teacher and principal, to Alzheimer’s disease. He movingly describes seeing her at her hospital window instructing invisible children (p. 7).

In essay 3, *Interest, Not Just IQ, Builds the Mind*, he challenges psychologists like Piaget who claimed that young children cannot think abstractly. He describes his 11-year-old grandson playing the highly complex card game *Magic* with friends. The rulebook alone, with 243 pages of definitions, makes bridge seem simple by comparison. His conclusion: “few limits” exist on what youth can do if they are motivated. Piaget, he argues, “set child psychology back decades” by convincing people otherwise. As for those who dismiss adolescents as “not fully developed,” his reply is a single word: “nonsense!” (p. 8).

In essay 9, *A Little Sociology and a Little Preaching About the New Kid on the Block*, he rails against schools that treat mid-year arrivals as “difficult.” Many of these children have moved because of a lost job, divorce, or homelessness. Such schools transmit hostility instead of welcome, compounding the pain of already shaken students. “Schools,” he writes, “are known for their humaneness or antipathy, and this is communicated from the first day” (p. 62).

Finally, in essay 17, *Premediation: A New Word for Educators and a New Technique for Helping Some Students Learn More Efficaciously*, he critiques after-school remediation. Repeating failed lessons, he argues, leaves children feeling “low” or “dumb.” Instead, he urges pre-mediation: give all students chances to think about new material before the formal lesson. Previewing helps everyone learn, without singling out some as slow.

All of these essays show that Berliner *cares!* He’s a real mensch!

I have already noted that throughout these essays we see Berliner’s social-scientist mind at work. Two examples stand out.

In essay 10, *The Great Switcheroo*, Berliner analyzes how attention has shifted from the causes of low school performance to the low test scores themselves. He writes:

I call what happened the Great Switcheroo; America’s attention was diverted from broad issues of poverty and thus diverted from concerns about housing, food insecurity, medical treatment, single-parent families, crime, drug use, lack of role models, a stagnant minimum wage, and the like. Instead, attention was focused on issues related to the outputs and characteristics of schooling: test scores, teacher tenure, unionization, teacher incompetence, and the magically always wonderful alternatives to our allegedly ‘failing’ public schools, namely, publicly supported voucher and charter schools. The Great

Switcheroo meant that both news media and elected officials would come to focus on school achievement, college readiness, and competitiveness, rather than . . .to hunger, housing, medical assistance, or the failure of the minimum wage to keep families free of those stressors. (p. 63)

For Berliner, political leaders and the press had blinded citizens to an obvious truth. The outputs of a system are largely explained by the inputs.

He documents the switcheroo with statistics. During the 1980s, the *New York Times* published about 10 articles a year on causes of poor performance. By 2007, under George W. Bush, equal opportunity had nearly disappeared from the coverage. That year the *Times* published 35 articles about international achievement gaps (p. 64).

The White House told the same story. Its website published 344 documents about achievement gaps but only three about poverty-related inputs (p. 66). Meanwhile, child poverty rates remained low in developed countries—Finland 4%, Denmark 5%—but reached 21% in the United States. Berliner’s acerbic comment: leaders, especially Republicans, “are loathe to facilitate programs that might alleviate poverty or its effects because—surprise, surprise—such programs require government funding. On the other hand, attacking teachers can be done for free!” (p. 65).

In essay 16, *Why We Need to End America’s Apartheid-Lite Housing Systems Soon*, Berliner turns again to inequality. He reminds us of the well-known finding that family socio-economic level powerfully shapes student performance. The PISA test shows a 100-point gap between the poorest and richest families, regardless of school attended.

But Berliner digs deeper. The mean socio-economic status of the student *cohort* also matters greatly. Place poor children among wealthier peers and their performance rises—by about 50 points. This cohort effect is stronger than the expected effect of better teachers or schools. He demonstrates this through clear and accessible statistical analysis (pp. 109–110).

Much of the achievement gap, then, is explained by neighborhood segregation by race and class. Busing poor children across districts has had little public support. The alternative is building low- and middle-income housing in wealthy districts, but residents fiercely resist this, preferring to protect the (unfair) advantages they chose for their own children.

Berliner’s humane passion runs through all these essays. He is never cold or detached, and his voice is consistently that of a deeply committed democratic educator. Yet one also begins to notice a tension, even at times something of a contradiction, in his thought. Orwell remarked in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that many British left intellectuals “loved” the working class in the abstract but disliked the actual working-class men and women they encountered: the problem was up close they *smelled*. There is something of a parallel in Berliner. Of course, he shows no trace of condescension toward *people*. The tension lies elsewhere: he passionately “loves” the ideals of democracy and public education, but recoils from the reality of actually existing democracies and public schools.

The disjunction is clearest in his writing on politics. In his powerful account of the “great switcheroo,” described earlier, Berliner lays out how legislators—primarily Republicans, though with complicity from iconic Democrats such as Clinton and Obama—shifted national attention away from the social causes of low student performance and toward disappointing school outcomes. As Berliner describes it, this switch allowed politicians to scapegoat teachers and schools while avoiding the much greater costs of addressing poverty, housing, food insecurity, and inadequate health care. The indictment grows even sharper in essay 11, *J’Accuse – Too Many of Arizona’s Politicians Have Been Mean, Cheap, Undemocratic, and on the Dole*. Here the title alone conveys his position. State legislators, he argues, make careers out of promising to cut costs and reduce taxes, while being so mean-spirited and shortsighted that they block reforms that could improve schools and, in the long run, save money as well. One might respond to Berliner by saying that this is simply democracy in action—messy, contradictory, and often cruel.

Berliner is equally critical of the daily practices of public schools. In essay 8, *Providing Students an Opportunity to Acquire Expertise and Teachers an Opportunity to Teach in Areas in Which They Possess Expertise*, Berliner takes aim at the fixed subject-matter curriculum, standardized testing, and rote teaching. Against this regime he imagines classrooms in which students engage in project learning. They pursue passions and develop expertise in areas they love, guided by teachers who themselves bring deep interests and expert capabilities to school. Why not, he asks, allow a teacher who loves opera, gardening, or carpentry to devote a portion of the week to cultivating student expertise in those areas? Why must the school day be bound so tightly to the “required” curriculum?

The same theme appears in essay 6, *Parents! Chill Out! Learning Losses in the ‘Required School Curriculum’ Are Easily Offset by Gains in the ‘Not-Required’ Curriculum*. Here Berliner recalls his childhood during New York’s polio outbreaks, when his mother, like many parents, pulled him from school in the summer heat. He spent those days on the beach playing with friends who differed widely in school achievement and social background. What they learned together—new skills, but also how to get along across differences—was as important as anything acquired in school. In essay 13, *The Place of ‘Soft Skills’ in the Ultimate Success of Our Children*, Berliner extends the point by arguing that such interpersonal capacities are far more predictive of long-term success than standardized measures of academic achievement.

Yet the tension between love of the ideal and frustration with the actual shows itself again when Berliner turns to the teaching profession. In his satirical essay 7, *My Incredibly Short Life as a Brain Surgeon and Some Thoughts about Teaching*, he ridicules efforts to bring mid-career professionals into classrooms without completing formal teacher-education programs. His humor is sharp, but one wonders at the inconsistency. If the fixed subject-matter curriculum is as broken as he describes in essay 8, and if schools must be transformed into places of passion and expertise, then why should entry into teaching remain so rigidly tied to fixed, prescribed formal programs of teacher preparation? Might not knowledge and experience from other professions enrich teaching, especially in the very projects Berliner so vividly imagines?

Taken together, these essays show Berliner at his most compelling and at his most paradoxical. His empathy for children, teachers, and families shines through; his

moral clarity about the failures of political leadership is bracing. Yet like Orwell's intellectuals, he sometimes seems to love the ideals of democracy and public education more than their messy, compromised realities. Readers will come away admiring Berliner's humane passion, while also puzzling over whether his democratic vision leaves enough space for democracy as it actually exists, and for schools as they actually operate—with all their imperfections and stubborn routines. Democracy and public schools as ideals may be radiant, but in Berliner's account, the actually existing versions too often smell.

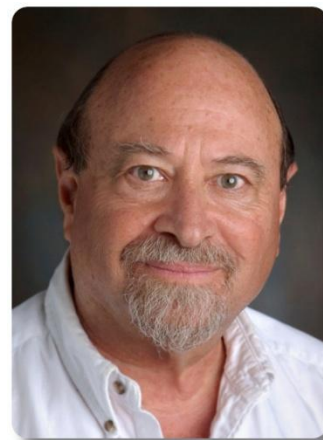
About the Reviewer

Leonard J. Waks is Professor Emeritus of educational leadership at Temple University. He has been Distinguished Professor of Educational Studies at Hangzhou Normal University from 2018-2024 and is now Distinguished Professor of Education at Qufu Normal University. Waks attended the University of Wisconsin (BA philosophy, 1964; PhD philosophy, 1968) and taught philosophy at Purdue University and Stanford University. He taught educational studies at Temple University and earned an Ed.D. in Psycho-educational Processes from Temple in 1984. He is the author of *Education 2.0: The Learningweb Revolution and the Transformation of the School* (2014), and *The Evolution and Evaluation of Massive Open Online Courses: MOOCs in Motion* (2016), as well as more than 120 scholarly articles and book chapters. He is a past president of the John Dewey Society and has been awarded the Dewey Society's Lifetime Achievement Award. He is founding editor of the journal *Dewey Studies*. He is editor of the book *Listening to Teach: Beyond Didactic Pedagogy* (2015), and (with Andrea English) *John Dewey's Democracy and Education: A Centennial Handbook* (2017). Waks was co-founder and program chair of the National Technological Literacy Conferences (UCEA first prize for creative programming, 1985), co-director of the National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar for College Teachers on *Rethinking Technology: Philosophy of Technology since 1945* (1996).




About the Book Author

David C. Berliner is well known to regular readers of this journal. He is a Regents' Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University. After earning a PhD at Stanford University working with Nate Gage and Lee J. Cronbach, David taught briefly at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, before assuming the directorship of the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development—the forerunner of West Ed—in San Francisco. He has been a visiting professor at universities around the world and held a



professorship at the University of Arizona prior to joining the faculty of ASU in 1987. He has won many awards including the E. L. Thorndike Award of the American Psychological Association, the Distinguished Contributions Award of AERA, and the Friend of Education Award of the NEA. He is the author of many articles and books including *The Manufactured Crisis* with Bruce Biddle (1996) and *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools* (2014).



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