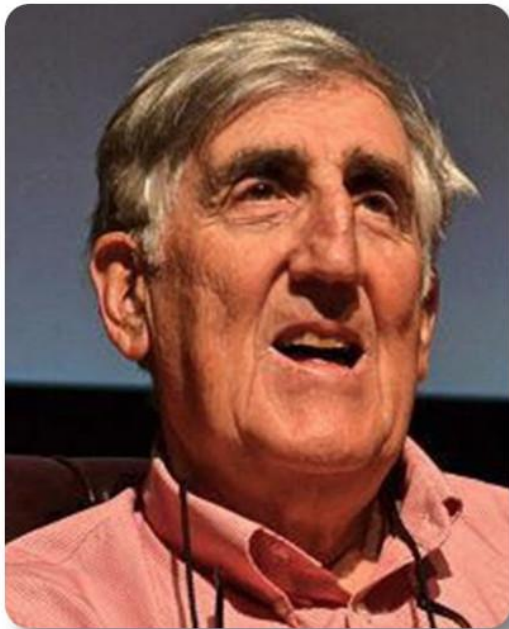




## THE ACCIDENTAL GIFT OF BEING A TEACHER

Larry Cuban<sup>1</sup>



I am a teacher. Others might classify me as an “educator” since for nearly a half-century, I have also been a superintendent, a teacher educator, and university professor. But it is classroom teaching—not administration or scholarly research—that has defined my adult life. Teaching has permitted me to be a lifelong learner, a persistent questioner, performer, and friend to former students and colleagues. Even as a

90-year-old, after a career of teaching, superintending, and doing research, I confess, that I still teach through my writings.

In teaching for decades, I have had moments when odd tingles ran up and down my spine as students’ thoughts and mine unexpectedly joined and became one. I have had moments when listening to students forced me to rethink a prized idea after I had closed the door. I have had moments when it became clear that my students had touched me deeply. Those moments I treasure.

Less treasured moments are those that left me numb with the repetitiveness of teaching one high school class after another or the nagging truth that the voice I heard coming out of my mouth glazed students’ eyes and caused their heads to sag onto their desks. Other moments left me sad when I knew in my heart that I had failed to reach some students. There were times when bright students stopped coming to class and dropped out of school despite my visits and phone calls to their homes.

Teaching has also spilled over to the rest of my life. I look everywhere for lessons that can be taught and learned. I approach situations and think: How can I get my point across? What can I learn from this person? Over the years, my wife, daughters, and dear friends have had to endure my questions, pauses, both an indirect and direct teaching style over dinner, pillow talk, and during vacations.

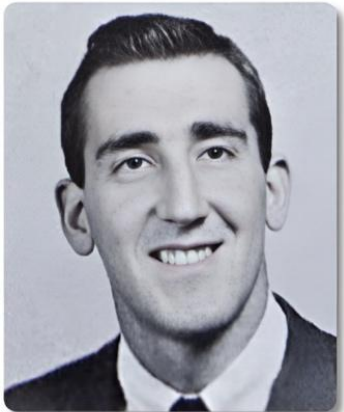
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Moreover, teaching history and trying to understand the past of education have forged my core personal and professional values. Knowledge of the past has shown me that both constancy and change mark human affairs. Through an historian's eyes, the present can be seen as having deep roots in the past. Thus, for nearly five decades, teaching in general and history in particular have been paramount in my life. Yet chance has also played a crucial role in my becoming and remaining a teacher.

My parents were Russian immigrants. Chabinsky was apparently a little too tough for the clerks at Ellis Island; thus, the Cuban family was born. I was born in Passaic, New Jersey, the third son of Morris and Fanny (nee Janoff) Cuban. I saw that my brothers who had to work during the Great Depression to provide family income and then serve the country in World War II lacked the chances that I had simply because I was born in the 1930s and they were born in the 1920s. My brother Norton's son, Mark, is not unknown to NBA fans.

Like many other immigrants' sons, I strove for the American Dream. Because sheer chance made me the third son, I was too young to serve in World War II and, as luck would have it, I had polio as a child and was declared physically unfit to serve in the Korean War. Therefore, I finished college



1955

and became a teacher in the mid-1950s, first in the Pittsburgh area, where I was raised, and then in the Cleveland public schools where I landed a job as a young white

teacher of mostly Black students. It was in Cleveland where I met and married Barbara, my wife for more than 50 years.

In Cleveland, I was a politically and intellectually naïve 21-year-old teacher eager to push my unvarnished passion for teaching history onto urban students bored with traditional lectures and note taking. At Glenville High School, I invented new lessons and materials in what was then called Negro history. My success in engaging many but not all students in studying the past emboldened me to think that sharp, energetic teachers—yes, like me—creating and using can't-miss history lessons could solve the problem of disengaged Black youth.

It was also at Glenville—not four undergraduate years at the University of Pittsburgh or later at Case-Western Reserve University where I got my master's degree in history—that I encountered someone who engaged me intellectually: Oliver Deex, Glenville's principal, a voracious reader and charming conversationalist. He introduced me to books and magazines I had never seen: *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Harpers*, *Atlantic*, *Nation*, and dozens of others, which he often lent to me.

Deex often invited to his home a small group of Glenville teachers committed to seeing their students go to college. When we were in his wood-paneled library, a room that looked as if it were a movie set, he would urge me to take this or that book. At our rushed lunches in high school or in his office after school, we would talk about what I read. I have no idea why he took an interest in the intellectual development of a gangly, fresh-faced, determined but naïve novice, but his insistent questioning of my ideas and gentle guidance whetted my appetite for ideas and their application to daily life and to schools.

After teaching seven years at Glenville, I was nearly finished with a doctorate in

American history at Case-Western Reserve and had already written chapters for a dissertation on Negro leadership in Cleveland. I had an offer in hand to teach U.S. history at a Connecticut college and another offer to stay in public schools. I was at a fork in my career road and had to choose.

I chose to stay in public schools. I took a one-year job in 1963 as a master teacher in history in a federally funded project located in Cardozo High School in Washington, D.C. to train returned Peace Corps volunteers to teach in ghetto schools, then euphemistically called “inner-city.” It was a big risk to move my family for only a year to D.C., but I was eager (and, yes, ambitious) to join those idealists drawn to Washington in the early 1960s by President John F. Kennedy who wanted to end urban school dropouts by transforming classrooms, using the community as a resource, and reach bigger goals than improved test scores.

Federal policymakers in those Kennedy-Johnson years—1963 to 1967—framed the problem of low-performing urban students dropping out of school as having too few skilled and knowledgeable teachers who could create engaging lessons. The pilot Cardozo Project in Urban Teaching was a teacher-driven, school-based, neighborhood-oriented solution to the problem of low-performing students. Master teachers in academic subjects trained recently returned Peace Corps volunteers to teach while drawing on community resources. Once trained, these ex-Peace Corps volunteers would become crackerjack teachers who could hook listless students through both creative lessons drawing from their knowledge of ghetto neighborhoods and personal relationships with students and their families.

A series of unexpected events, including uncertain funding for the project, forced me

and the family to trek back to Cleveland each year to seek a regular teaching job and scratch out summer income as I gambled on the roulette game of whether or not federal dollars would be released to continue the program. As luck would have it, the Project got funded each year, and I continued to teach at Cardozo High School, eventually being named head of the program.

Directing the project and coping with uncertain funding opened my eyes about how politically and bureaucratically complicated it is to engage students, raise academic achievement, and involve parents and residents in improving their local schools. The intersection among a school, the students, community, and organizational bureaucracies became concrete to me and other teachers as we spent time with families in Cardozo neighborhoods.

It took four long years for me and other advocates to convince the D.C. schools superintendent and school board that this program for recruiting and training Peace Corps returnees was a decided benefit to a district that had to scramble every year to staff all of its classrooms. The superintendent and board finally agreed to take over the program in 1967, re-naming it the Urban Teacher Corps and expanding it from recruiting and training 50 new teachers a year to more than 100 annually.

After this exhilarating but exhausting experience with a federally funded program, I returned to teaching history in another D.C. high school. I wrote a book about these experiences and created with co-author Phil Roden a series of U.S. history paperbacks for urban students (Cuban & Roden, 1971). After I taught at Roosevelt High School, the D.C. deputy superintendent invited me to head a new department aimed at revitalizing the entire district’s teaching corps. I was now a reformer responsible for a system-wide program located in district headquarters from which I worked closely

with the superintendent and school board members.

The school board and superintendent had defined the problem of poor schools and low-performing students as one where teachers' knowledge and skills were underdeveloped and needed bolstering. The organizational solution they adopted and one I convinced myself was worthwhile was professional development for the entire D.C. staff. But school reform from the district office perch looked very different than from teaching in Cleveland classrooms, working at Cardozo High School with Peace Corps returnees, and teaching history in D.C. high schools. I described and analyzed these District of Columbia experiences, particularly in the Cardozo Project in Urban Teaching in *To Make A Difference: Teaching in Inner City Schools* (Cuban, 1970). Those experiences at Cardozo High School, in the District of Columbia bureaucracy, and as superintendent in Arlington are also described in *The Managerial Imperative: The Practice of Leadership* (Cuban, 1988).

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After two years in the downtown district office, I grew weary of seeing aggressive policies pushing system-wide changes get shot down time and again by headquarters' staff or get strangled by fierce racial politics. Fundamental changes had recently occurred in D.C. governance with a newly elected mayor, city council, and school board leading to a take-no-prisoner brand of racial politics in which I was a bit player who grew tired of playing that game. I voluntarily returned to the classroom, "demoted without prejudice," my official transfer notice read.

Here I was in my mid-30s, again a high school history teacher but no longer interested in college teaching. For nearly a decade, then, I had seen up close how the District of Columbia schools eagerly

embraced reform after reform and proceeded to bury each one in bureaucratic channels or alter the policies so much as to become unrecognizable when they appeared at the classroom door. My experiences had convinced me that system-wide problems needed system-wide solutions unimpeded by racial politics and bureaucrats protecting their turf. Maybe, I thought, I might be able to supply those solutions as a superintendent. Was I now an older but still innocent and ambitious educator? Yes, I was.

To become an urban superintendent, I had to get a Ph.D. So, after returning to a university as a middle-aged graduate student with family in tow, I got a doctorate. Because I had a master's in history from Case-Western Reserve and because I had scrounged a research grant while teaching high school to write about the D.C. reform effort to transform the central office, I sought out graduate fellowships that would concentrate on the history of school reform. Here again, chance played a large part in what I ended up doing. I had applied to three graduate schools and two offered no financial aid. But through the efforts of Professor David Tyack, Stanford University, did.

The two years I spent at Stanford were powerful intellectual experiences for me. I had told David Tyack, my adviser then—years later my teaching colleague, co-author, and dear friend—that I wanted to get the doctorate swiftly and find a superintendency.

With an abiding interest in history, I pursued courses that Tyack taught in the history of education but also studied political science, organizational sociology, and the economics of education. The early 1970s were exciting times for scholars of education. For anyone interested in history of education and the social sciences, it was an intellectual feast. The work of Michael

Katz, Joel Spring, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, Carl Kaestle, and David Tyack, some of it tinged by a version of neo-Marxism, other works advancing new theories of bureaucracy and organizational decision-making, had shaken mainstream historians of education.

If motivation and readiness are prerequisites for learning, I had them in excess. My experiences in Cleveland and D.C. public schools were rich but specific and non-theoretical. Moving from being a teacher to a researcher, I had to embrace analytical thinking over personal involvement, generalizations over particular facts. Through graduate work, I discovered connections with the past, seeing theories at work in what I had done and, most important to me, coming to see the world of schooling, past and present, through political, sociological, economic, and organizational lenses. These analytic tools drove me to re-examine my teaching and administrative experiences. Informative lectures, long discussions with other students, close contact with a handful of professors, and working on a dissertation about three big city superintendents (Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.) before and during their struggles over desegregation made the two years an intensely satisfying experience. I gained new insights and transitioned, uneasily to be sure, from a teacher to a researcher but without losing my footing in schools and classrooms.

David Tyack's patient and insightful prodding through well-aimed questions turned archival research and writing the dissertation into an intellectual high. I learned from Tyack to frame historical questions into puzzles to be solved, even (and sometimes, especially) if they ran counter to accepted interpretations of contemporaries and historians.

Organizational theorist Jim March opened up a world that meshed with my experiences. From March, I learned the importance of looking at organizations and their environments in multiple ways, of learning to live with uncertainty, of the tenacious hold that rationalism, not randomness, has upon both policymakers and practitioners, and of understanding that ambiguity and conflict are part of the natural terrain of organizational life. So, whenever I read about superintendents and principals who found their graduate preparation either insufferable or inadequate, I recalled how different my experiences were. Those two years at Stanford turned out to be first-rate preparation for the next seven years I served as a superintendent.

After being turned down by 50 (not a typo) school boards, I lucked out when a reform-minded (and risk-taking) school board appointed me school chief in Arlington, Virginia, a city of around 160,000 population at that time, just across the Potomac from Washington, D.C. For seven years I worked within a district becoming culturally diverse and shrinking in enrollment as its test scores declined.

The school board and I had defined the central problem as the public's loss of confidence in the district ever reversing the downward spiral in academic achievement as minority children increased. Fortunately, Arlington had a strong tax base to operate schools. Close superintendent oversight of each school's performance with measures assessing progress toward basic school board goals (e.g., increased academic achievement, critical thinking skills, growth in the arts and humanities, and community involvement) was the objective. The board and I believed that steady pressure on school staffs wedded to ample support of teachers and principals, would lift achievement, reach the goals we set, and renew community confidence in its schools. State

test results marched steadily upward, local metrics on other goals showed improvement, and parent surveys documented growing support for Arlington schools.

Within that big picture, however, school board and superintendent policy initiatives of closing small schools and launching innovations aimed at making incremental changes in both school practices and the culture of the system stirred up fierce political conflicts, particularly during two national economic recessions. Heading a complicated organization with multiple stakeholders inside and outside the system stretched my skills and knowledge to a breaking point. During crises I learned the hard way about managing dilemmas and negotiating political and organizational trade-offs between prized district goals.

In 1980, a newly elected school board took office eager to reduce school spending. They wanted a school chief more in sync with their values than I was. I completed my contract in 1981 and departed for Stanford to teach graduate students and do research.

In those seven years as superintendent, I learned the difference between problems that can be solved and unsolvable dilemmas that have to be well managed. I found out that reforms needed jump-starting in a system but once initiated had to be prodded, elaborated, massaged, and adapted as they entered schools and were put into classroom practice.

Yes, I did learn that problems of low achievement were intricately connected to what families and students brought with them to schools, what teachers did in their classrooms, how principals worked in their schools, and how boards and superintendents finessed (or fouled up) the intersecting political, social, and economic interests of various stakeholders inside and outside the schools. I learned how historical events combined with organizational and political factors to shape leaders' actions in

wrestling with problems. Most of all, my years as superintendent made me allergic to those who offered me fairy tale solutions—kissing a frog to get a prince—to the problem of low-performing schools reaching multiple goals. I returned to academia fully aware of the world in which districts, schools, and classrooms operated.

I came to Stanford in 1981 on a five-year contract as an associate professor fully intending to return to an urban superintendency. In 1985, I applied for a half-dozen posts and made the short list each time but failed to get the job I wanted. It became clear that my plan to return to a superintendency wasn't working. When the Dean asked me if I wished to seek tenure as a full professor (I had written three books in the five years I was an associate professor, I agreed to be reviewed since I would be shortly unemployed and had a family to support. The University granted me tenure in 1986.

Clearly, in my mind, I had wanted another shot at a superintendency and had failed. It was surely an accident that I ended up a tenured professor, a piece of luck that I have had no regrets over.

As a university professor between 1981-2001, I had sought through my teaching, research, and writing to improve schooling through historical studies aimed at policymakers, administrators, and practitioners. I had been deeply interested in the nexus between policy and practice and how reformers, eager to alter what teachers do daily, had often gone astray and unknowingly repeated the errors earlier generations of school reformers had made in disrespecting teaching and teachers.

I returned to Stanford as a veteran practitioner who had framed and re-framed the problems of disengaged students, tired teachers, and lousy academic achievement.

In seeking solutions, I had looked, at first, to classroom, then, school, and finally system-wide solutions without ever losing sight of the importance of the teacher. I wanted deep changes in a district and a community but saw that byte-sized increments over time were necessary to achieve gigabyte reforms both inside and outside schools. This chastened, far humbler, reformer also learned that hoopla-driven innovations, particularly those applicable to schools and classrooms—were highly contingent on savvy leadership, luck, and certain conditions being in place including adequate funding. When these conditions were absent, a reform had a short, happy life and, poof, disappeared.

In the two decades I spent at Stanford thinking, teaching, and writing about school reform, I now had the precious time to pursue policy and practice questions that I could not as a high school teacher and superintendent. Why, for example, did high school classrooms in which I sat in the late-1940s seem so similar to the ones I observed in the 1980s as a superintendent? Why do some reforms stick and others disappear like bird-tracks on a sandy shore? Why is it so hard to fundamentally change schools with large numbers of poor children? Why do schools focus on test scores rather than other, larger civic and social goals? These, and many more policy-driven questions, often requiring me to examine the past, were anchored in decades of classroom and administrative experiences.

In returning to Stanford after being superintendent, I easily resumed the connection I had forged with David Tyack when I was a student years earlier. Then it was an advisor/advisee relationship, but with my return to Stanford, it blossomed into an enduring collegiality and strong friendship that lasted until 2016, when David died.

Because of Tyack's extensive knowledge of the Bay area and his love of



David Tyack & Larry Cuban

the outdoors, we started biking together, including day and week-long trips. We shared doctoral students, worked on committees together, and team-taught (for 10 of those years) a history of school reform course.

We worked well together on both personal and professional levels. He delved into the history of past policies designed to alter institutions and worked through their anticipated and unanticipated consequences. While I pursued a similar strategy, I was also keenly interested in tracing the varied histories of contemporary policies aimed at influencing classroom practices. So, our intellectual interests converged when we taught the course. It was also in that course that the ideas in *Tinkering toward Utopia* were developed, tried out on graduate students, refined, and eventually mapped out (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

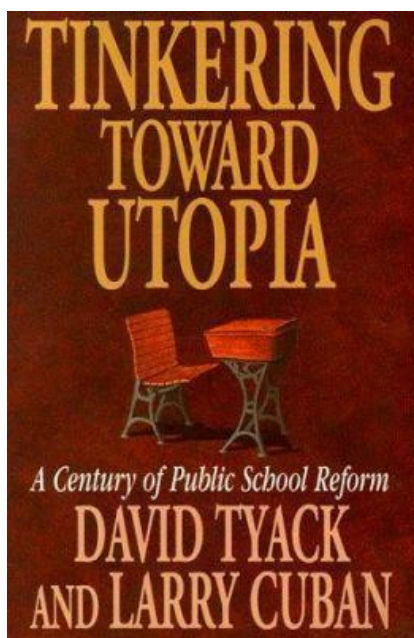
The intellectual give-and-take between two historians of education who are excited about a subject, teach it together, and want to collaborate on a book is a fascinating process. Here is what I remember of how we conceptualized *Tinkering* between 1989 and 1991.

Shortly after we developed the graduate course, we received a Spencer Foundation grant to do a history of school reform. By 1991, we had prepared a rough outline of the book and had divided up the chapters according to the research we had done and wanted to do on this book.

During this time Tyack and I had resumed our bike rides. We would drive to the base of Kings Mountain Road, park the car, and bike to Skyline Drive. Usually, it would take us an hour and a half, including water breaks, to do the climbing and about a half-hour for the descent to the parking lot and car.

During those 90-odd minutes of climbing Kings Mountain we talked through particular chapters, mentioning sources to use, and noting the perspectives of other historians of education. As we biked upwards to Skyline, there was much heavy breathing, numerous water breaks, and many occasions to talk as we pedalled upward. The ride down the mountain was fast but we continued to talk as brakes squealing.

On the way home, in the car we would continue the discussions of different points in a chapter, particularly sources that each of us should look into. After I would get home, I would type up a draft memo of the key ideas we had discussed, what views we had expressed, sources we mentioned, and any interpretations that had arisen during the bike ride. I sent the memo to Tyack and within a day, he would add to, amend, and occasionally delete points in the memo and then I would type up the final copy of the memo that would become a guide to each of us working on our chapter drafts. We mapped out the entire book in this manner.



It was a genuinely exciting experience to have these conversations about issues in school reform while we were also jointly teaching the course. Generally, we knew where our interpretive history of school reform would fall in the world of education historians. We had depicted Americans' faith in education as an ill-fated panacea to unrelenting national difficulties. We documented the perennial practice of policymakers “educationalizing” economic, social, demographic, and political problems, that is, delegating to schools the task of solving serious issues. We pointed out endless cycles of crisis, utopian demands, and subsequent disillusionment. By examining historically the intersections between policy and practice and the impact of organizational and

political factors on both, we had carved out a centrist niche between those historians of education on the political right and left. Harvard University Press published *Tinkering toward Utopia* in 1995. Since then, Tyack and I bicycled together for another decade. We diverged in our writings, but we continued to read each other's draft articles and books. Our close friendship lasted until he died in 2016.

After 1995, much of my writing has been on the nexus between policy and classroom practice, often including an historical background to the particular policy issue I was investigating. In *Why It Is So Hard to Get Good Schools* (2003a), *Oversold and Underused* (2003b), *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots* (Cuban & Usdan, 2003), and *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line* (2007), historical context surrounded policy issues revealing again and

again both change and continuity over time and their connection to classroom practice. In *Partners in Literacy* (2007), my daughter Sondra Cuban and I wrote about the historical and contemporary use of technology in public schools and libraries in cultivating literacy.

Other studies I have completed examined Austin Independent School District (AISD) over the past half-century as it struggled with the continuing legacy of a once-segregated city in its low-income, minority schools. *As Good As It Gets: What School Reform Brought To Austin* (2010). As in many of my studies, I provide historical context to show many positive changes that have occurred in the district and the continuing issues of poverty and race in chronically low-performing schools.

Since then, I have written *Confessions of a School Reformer* (2021), where I delved into my memories of being a student in Pittsburgh (PA) public schools, a social studies teacher in Cleveland and Washington, D.C., and a professor at Stanford University. In 2023, *The Enduring*

*Classroom: Teaching Then and Now* was published. It distills over four decades of my writings about teaching practices in U.S. classrooms.

I close this intellectual autobiography of a teacher who moved in and out of teaching and administration, on a zigzag trajectory ending in becoming, with a dollop of luck, an accidental scholar/practitioner. I have been and remain deeply committed to teaching and writing policy history to understand better how and why school reform policies, past and present, seldom achieve their intended outcomes in altering classroom practices and reaching the goals of ever-higher standards of literacy, civic engagement, career preparation, and moral growth. A touch of idealism—perhaps even innocence—still rattles my bones since I believe that better crafted policies, respect for teachers' expertise, stronger community partnerships and, yes, even a little bit of luck, will improve student learning toward these ends in urban, suburban, and rural schools.

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