

H-Net Reviews

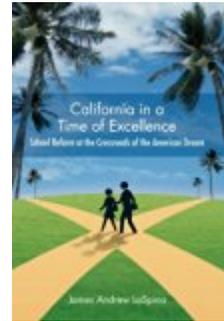
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Andrew LaSpina. *California in a Time of Excellence: School Reform at the Crossroads of the American Dream*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. x + 207 pp. \$68.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-2493-4; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-2494-1.

Reviewed by Keith A. Erikson (Department of History, The University of Texas at El Paso)

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The Failure of Excellence

In recent months, the dominant American paradigm of standards-based education has taken several significant hits. Early in 2010, former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch reversed course to denounce school choice and accountability after working for decades to promote them in California and the nation. In March and again in May, a social conservative faction on the Texas state board of education rejected scholarly expertise to adopt social studies standards that distort both good history and sound pedagogy. In recent weeks, the state of Arizona passed legislation banning ethnic studies programs and authorizing the dismissal of teachers with Spanish accents.[1] Viewed within the context of the ever-shortening twenty-first-century news cycle, such chaos seems sudden and unprecedented.

James Andrew LaSpina looks beyond the transiently twittering media to understand “the ideological currents that have shaped the history of American public education” over the last half century (p. 5). To that end, LaSpina provides a very close analysis of the politics and policies of California’s systemic reform movement from 1966 to 2006, a period he sees as leading up to and responding to the publication of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). The movement was characterized by two important attributes: the use of universities as partners in reforming K-12 education and the expanded role of curriculum development as a tool for enacting systemic change. Specifically, he fo-

cus on the political relations between California’s governors, legislature, and state superintendents to trace the implementation and assess the impact of the California State Board of Education’s *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* (1987). LaSpina ultimately concludes that the reforms implemented between 1983 and 1998 failed and were simply codified over the past decade. Connecting the particulars of California history to the philosophical debate between John Dewey and Walter Lippman about democratic education almost a century ago, LaSpina concludes that “the state may be less an agent of reform than its regulator. Nevertheless, its role as mediator and arbiter is necessary” (p. 122).

In part 1, LaSpina sets California’s systemic reform movement within the context of two ideological developments and an important power shift between them. On the one hand, the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the free speech movement at University of California-Berkeley in the late 1960s, and a California law requiring ethnic studies courses in 1984 (ACR 71) all seemed to point toward increased racial integration in education. Simultaneously, the election of Ronald Reagan as governor in 1966 shifted California politics geographically south from Sacramento to Hollywood. Reagan challenged Berkeley, rejected the Hispanic-led grape boycott, and supported Proposition 21 (1973) against busing. In a series of rulings in the case of *Serrano v. Priest* (1971, 1976, and 1977), the California Supreme Court found tax-supported public education unconstitutional

and mandated equal finance, and the passage of Proposition 13 (1978) cut property taxes and reduced school funding. In an ironic twist, California voters declared their distrust of state government while at the same time ceded greater control to the state as the focus in education shifted from integration and equal educational opportunity to compensation and school finance.

At this critical moment, an unsuspected alliance between superintendent Bill Honig and state senator Gary Hart produced a focus on curriculum to enact reform. The legislature enacted a sea change in philosophy through an omnibus education bill (SB 813) that called for higher graduation requirements, allowed for new subject frameworks, and promoted a more academic curriculum. Unlike the present case in Texas where the board explicitly rejected experts, California's shift away from integration toward instruction called for top experts in each content area to develop curriculum standards. In part 2, LaSpina traces the politics that first shut classroom teachers out of the development process and then brought them back in to produce professional development, statewide testing, and aligned textbooks.

In LaSpina's analysis, several parts of this decades-long process contributed to its ultimate failure. The conservative turn in state politics transformed the state's capacity to enact change into an effort simply to measure it dollar by dollar. In time, wealthier suburbs compensated for minimal state funding by creating supplemental funds, thereby creating de facto inequality that was ultimately ruled against in *Williams v. State of California* (2003). The state's drive toward English-only existence—in its ballots (1986), in its non-funding of bilingual education (1987), and in its mandate for quick student immersion (1998)—combined with an impulse toward more visual textbooks to make the standardized curriculum more basic as depth was sacrificed to accessibility and competence to testability. Finally, as immigration transformed California into a global diaspora, it also shifted the question of identity from culture to religion, illustrated by a

2006 lawsuit in which Hindu Americans won the right to be identified in textbooks by their religion before their nationality.

LaSpina's study delves deeply and complexly into the world of California's educational politics. It opens and closes by contextualizing California within the tumult of the 1960s and the global migrations of the twenty-first century. Elements in the middle of the story, however, do not always receive such rich contextualization—Ravitch's ideas about myth and narrative could have been placed in a wider intellectual context, and the struggle between history and social studies could have been explained beyond its origins in the 1920s and tensions in the 1970s. LaSpina also could have made more of his significant observation about the paradox of conservative political philosophy and practice in which its advocates distrust and decry government only to inadvertently cede greater control to it.

California in a Time of Excellence provides a detailed “nuts-and-bolts” analysis of the history of California's complicated educational politics and policy and comes at a welcome moment in which states and the nation are rethinking the foundation, funding, and future of educational excellence in the United States.

Note

[1]. Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); on the Texas social studies debate, see Center for History Teaching & Learning, “TEKSWatch,” 2010, <http://tekswatch.utep.edu> (accessed July 7, 2010); and on Arizona, see Miriam Jordan, “Arizona Grades Teachers on Fluency,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2010, and Jon Wiener, “Arizona Bans Ethnic Studies—Update,” *The Nation*, May 12, 2010, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/arizona-bans-ethnic-studies%E2%80%94update> (accessed July 7, 2010).

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