

***The School Reform Landscape: Fraud, Myth, and Lies***

by Christopher H. Tienken and Donald C. Orlich

Reviewed by:  
 Michael Ian Cohen, EdD  
 Vice Principal  
 Curriculum, Data Analysis, and Professional Development  
 Tenafly High School  
 Tenafly, NJ

If anything maintains bi-partisan support in today’s polarized political environment, it might be the neoliberal orientation to education reform.

Calling for standardization of curriculum and assessments, performance accountability for schools and teachers, and a culture of competition among education providers, the reform movement deifies the invisible hand of the market at the altar of corporatization.

Dissenting voices being either few in number or relatively silent in these times, Tienken and Orlich risk professional marginalization in writing *The School Reform Landscape: Fraud, Myth, and Lies*. But yet they demonstrate convincingly that our public education discourse is steeped in unsubstantiated and unquestioned claims that higher standards and tougher tests will solve all economic woes and social inequities.

The authors could be labeled conspiracy theorists if they were judged by their allegations alone—for example, that recent federal education laws such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* were really designed to dismantle the public system—but they bring the data to prove it.

When all the evidence is adduced, the authors build a frighteningly solid case. Readers should be enraged by this book and the frauds, myths, and lies put forth by the current reform spinsters.

Tienken and Orlich know their American education history, and without dragging the reader through every last detail of it, they put together a very readable account of the way recent reform efforts are only a “reincarnation” of past failures.

For example, they link the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the American Diploma Project to what they call the “mechanistic” and “straight-jacketed” systems promoted by the Committees of Ten and Fifteen in the 1890s—systems that were “bankrupt” and “empirically destroyed over 85 years ago” by Thorndike’s early research and Tyler et al.’s landmark *Eight-Year Study*.

Readers see that by the 1940s, non-standardized, problem-posing, learner-centered curricula had gained more evidence of effectiveness—as measured by standardized test scores, student success in college, and overall critical thinking skills—than the standards movement ever has, and probably ever will.

All of this matters because the Common Core, impending national assessments, and charter schools and other choice programs were sold to the American public in the name of closing achievement gaps between privileged and disadvantaged groups.

In reality, as Tienken and Orlich show, these on-going reforms—supported by spurious claims and political chicanery—have only moved us closer to a dual system of education: one tier of elite schools for the wealthy, and another tier of “stripped down” and under-resourced public schools for everyone else. The authors advocate the rebuilding of a unitary system of public education that promotes equity, egalitarianism, and the values of democratic participation.

According to Tienken and Orlich, efforts to centralize and homogenize American public schools have made our education system more totalitarian than democratic. And in true tyrannical form, the system has been promoted by lies—from manufactured crises to misleading and amateur interpretations of student performance on standardized exams.

Readers of this book will walk away with clear evidence of fraud, which the authors present through analyses of data from sources such as declassified government files and assessment and economics statistics.

We learn, for example, how the Russian launch of Sputnik in 1957, which caused little concern to U.S. government officials, was used by the Eisenhower administration to create a sense of inferiority in science and math education among the American public; how evaluators of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the “Nation’s Report Card,” have made sweeping claims of educational decline founded on arbitrary and ideologically-based notions of “proficiency”;

how international test scores and the use of national standards have no statistical relationship to economic competitiveness; how federal legislation for education reform has siphoned taxpayers’ money into the coffers of textbook and test publishers—and the list goes on.

Crucially, Tienken and Orlich move beyond critique in this book. They gain credibility not by denying the need for accountability or by refusing the usefulness of standards altogether.

In fact, they call for a new kind of accountability, one that includes standards that are developmentally appropriate using evidence from cognitive psychology, challenging curriculum and assessments developed locally by teachers, and a repurposed federal education department that is concerned more with funding and equity than it is with designing classroom instruction and punishing schools. It is time to assess the inputs as well as the outputs of our education system.

An additional point we might take from this book: anyone who would engage in meaningful dialogue about education reform should know at least the basics of our nation’s educational history.

Even those who claim progressive ideas today like problem-based learning, differentiation, socially-conscious curriculum—should recognize their debt to the educators who developed and rigorously tested these methods in the beginning of the previous century.

Ironically, those who call for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century public school system and hope to create such a system through standardization and assessing students with national measures are really peddling a 20<sup>th</sup> century reform: one that never proved its efficacy.

Those who call for a curriculum that is designed close to the child, not from a federal office and that values relevance to students' lives and local autonomy, are also advocating

an early 20<sup>th</sup> century version of school reform.

There is a difference, though. The latter group has empirical evidence in its favor.

### **Reviewer Biography**

Michael I. Cohen is vice principal of curriculum, data analysis, and professional development at Tenafly High School in Bergen County, New Jersey. He also teaches a graduate course in research methods as an adjunct instructor at Montclair State University. E-mail: [michaeliancohen@gmail.com](mailto:michaeliancohen@gmail.com)

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