



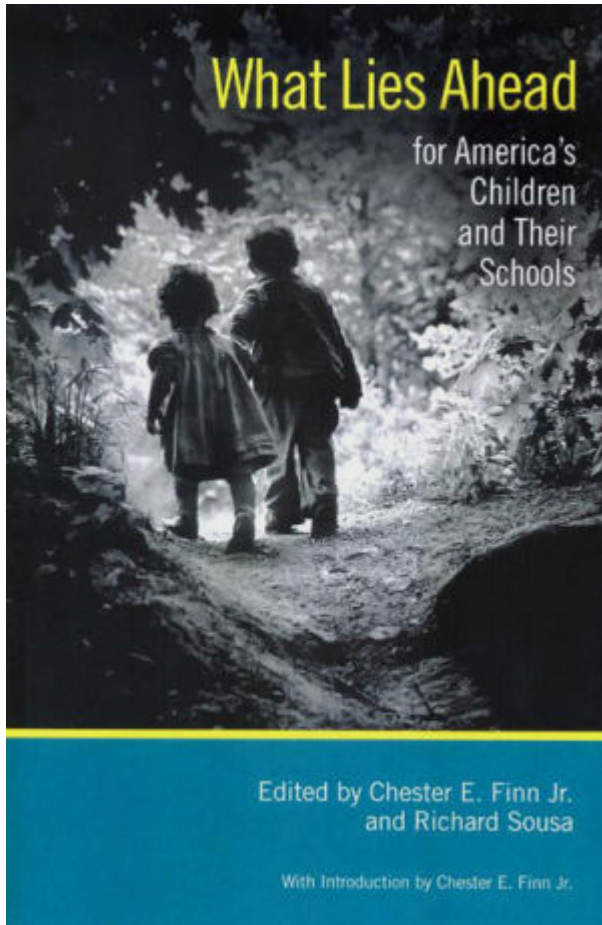
SOUTHCENTRAL KENTUCKY'S #1 SOURCE FOR NEWS

DAILY NEWS

'Exceptionally well-researched'

Posted: Sunday, May 25, 2014 1:00 am

"What Lies Ahead for America's Children and Their Schools" edited by Chester E. Finn Jr. and Richard Sousa. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2014. 226 pages, \$14.95.



"The coming decade holds immense potential for dramatic improvement in American education and in the achievement of American children – provided that we seize the many opportunities at hand," Chester E. Finn Jr. explains at the beginning of "What Lies Ahead for America's Children and Their Schools," the new book he co-edited with Richard Sousa.

"But the forces of resistance, lethargy, complacency, and inertia that have largely blocked such dramatic improvements over the past several decades won't magically vanish," he continues. "Rather, they can be counted upon to do their utmost to keep things pretty much as they have been."

Finn is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution where he serves as chair of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. Prior to assuming his present responsibilities he was a professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University. His previous books include "Exam Schools: Inside America's Most Selective Public High Schools" and "Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut." Sousa is senior associate director of the Hoover Institution; an economist, he has co-authored several previous publications

including "School Figures: The Data behind the Debate," and "Reacting to the Spending Spree: Policy Changes We Can Afford."

"What Lies Ahead" is a product of the Task Force, a group that has advocated for education reform since it was founded around fifteen years ago. The 11 members who comprise the Task Force each contributed a chapter to this monumental undertaking, which represents an effort to explain what's wrong with public education in America and, more importantly, what needs to be done to improve it.

Conceptually, the book is constructed in three major sections. "Part 1: Governance, Politics, and Personnel," sets the stage for what follows by describing the current impediments to meaningful education reform in a comprehensive and compelling manner. "Part 2: Crucial Changes" discusses the evolving nature of education as precipitated by technology, economics, and the ever more diverse climate in which today's schools operate. Finally, "Part 3: Resources and Research" provides an

evidence-based analysis of what is achievable – and what is not – and then lays out a realistic plan for moving forward on all levels of the educational hierarchy.

As would be expected given the nature of this kind of report, each of the eleven chapters is exceptionally well-researched and written by professionals who have made the improvement of education in this country their primary mission in life. As is the case with any attempt to deal effectively with a key societal challenge, however, it is fairly obvious from the first page that the members of the Task Force have an agenda. In short, they want to completely overturn the oversight mechanisms currently in place with respect to our public schools and replace them with policies and guidelines more closely aligned with empirical reality – something easier said than done in most instances.

“Governance can tie up funds on unproductive activities, causing schools to spend more for facilities and transportation than school leaders would do if they had their choice, or to teach some students courses they are not prepared for and to teach other students subjects they already know,” Paul T. Hill asserts in “Rethinking Governance,” the inaugural chapter. And while Hill acknowledges practices many readers are no doubt familiar with, he is quick to point out the inherent difficulty in addressing those problems: “Governance changes are tricky. Proposals that assume that some class of actors, if put fully in charge, will naturally seek effective schools for all children are doomed to failure. No one group or entity has exactly the same interest as children, and each can be expected, in the long run, to pull schooling, and the uses of public funds, in directions that meet its own interests.”

A theme running consistently through the narrative is the fundamental need to develop and implement strategies and initiatives with a proven track record – or at least those having demonstrated some measure of success in carefully controlled pilot programs. Of all the authors contributing to “What Lies Ahead,” Grover ‘Russ’ Whitehurst is perhaps the most vociferous campaigner for this approach.

“The reason that businesses such as Google, Harrah’s, and CapitalOne have an appetite for evidence of what works is that avoidable errors in their business decisions go directly to their bottom line, for which managers at many levels and the CEOs are accountable,” Whitehurst explains in “Relying on Evidence,” the 10th chapter. “Education, in contrast, is by and large a public monopoly. The most powerful way to incentivize evidence-based decision-making in education would be a system of delivery in which schools compete for students and their funding and in which the jobs and compensation of school employees and managers are conditional on their success in attracting and retaining students.”

True, in a market-driven economy, competition does tend to enhance quality and lower costs, which benefits the consumer in a variety of ways. Unfortunately in the United States, the question of how to improve our schools is often as philosophical as it is practical. Those who oppose many of the reforms outlined in this book are quick to point out that education is not a “business” in the traditional sense.

Admittedly, I began my journey through “What Lies Ahead” with a somewhat skeptical mindset. I have had occasion to read several books purporting to solve the education crisis in America. In almost every case, the proposed solutions seldom lived up to the claims made on the dust cover. I am happy to report that I was pleasantly surprised by what the various contributors have to say in the present volume. My sense is that you would, too.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*