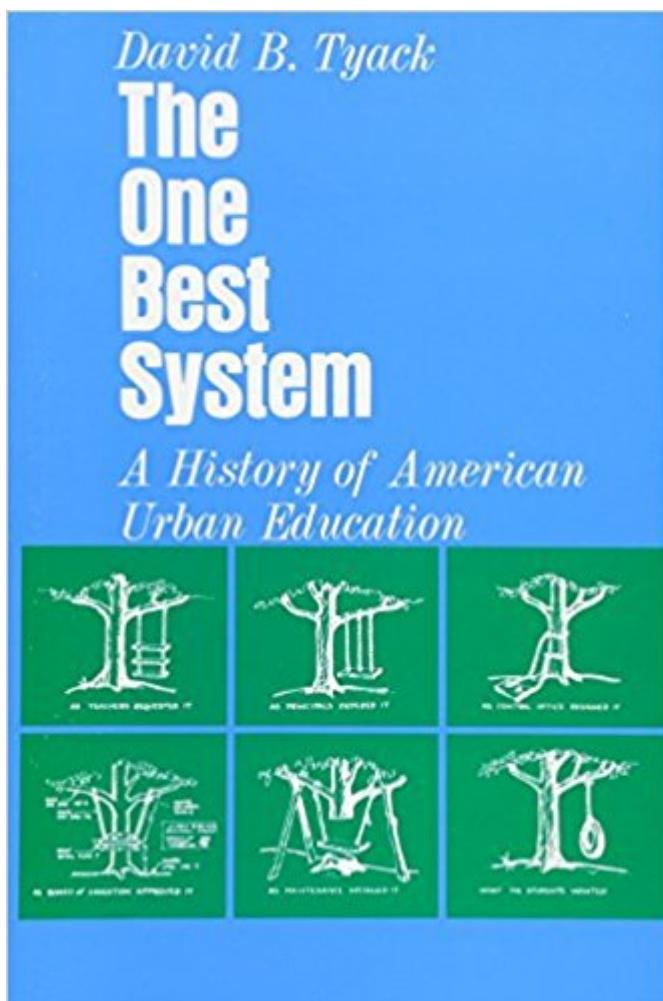


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# The One Best System: A History Of American Urban Education



## **Synopsis**

The One Best System a major new interpretation of what actually happened in the development of one of America's most influential institutions. At the same time it is a narrative in which the participants themselves speak out: farm children and factory workers, frontier teachers and city superintendents, black parents and elite reformers. And it encompasses both the achievements and the failures of the system: the successful assimilation of immigrants, racism and class bias; the opportunities offered to some, the injustices perpetuated for others. Mr. Tyack has placed his colorful, wide-ranging view of history within a broad new framework drawn from the most recent work in history, sociology, and political science. He looks at the politics and inertia, the ideologies and power struggles that formed the basis of our present educational system. Using a variety of social perspectives and methods of analysis, David Tyack illuminates for all readers the change from village to urban ways of thinking and acting over the course of more than one hundred years.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This brilliant and readable book opens a variety of new perspectives on the development of public education in this country...Tyack does the most responsible, nonsentimental social history yet seen, and I think it highly likely that readers will find themselves educated, enlarged, and excited by what he says. (Maxine Greene Today's Education)

David Tyack is Vida Jacks Professor of Education and Professor of History, Emeritus, at Stanford University.

I was looking for a historical framework to view my community's local educational history. This book has been an outstanding aid in this effort. I live in the South where the education systems contain both urban and rapidly urbanizing schools and tend to be more consolidated organizationally. My state's and local events were known but this book brought them into context for me. I wish this book has been one of the texts used in my history of urban schools class and have since recommended it to my university.

Amazing read for Urban Educators!

Good Condition

Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Ellen Lagemann (1989) has observed, "One cannot understand the history of education in the United States in the twentieth century unless one realizes that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost" (p.185). Put differently, in the words of David Tyack (1974), it was the administrative progressives who won and all the others who lost. In his classic work on the bureaucratization of schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s--*The One Best System*--Tyack suggests that school reformers of the late 19th century saw efficiency as the *sine qua non* to human progress, and therefore borrowed and amalgamated concepts like regularity, hierarchy, docility, punctuality, assessment, and conformity into evolving administrative structures of schools, for these qualities seemed to unequivocally spur the booming production in industrial outfits of the time. In short, schools became corporations. His thesis is clear and iterative, his prose distinctly rich, his revision of early historical accounts legitimate (especially those proffered by the likes of Elwood Cubberly), and perhaps most important, the literary arsenal from which he draws support is diffuse. As cities grew rapidly at the close of the 19th century, the need for social control became more imperative than ever. Tyack shows how school centralization in the early 20th century was merely microcosmic of broad shifts occurring in large cities (e.g., police, public health, welfare systems). In education, systematization of schools was veiled behind the banner of "taking schools out of politics"--a movement led by Wealthy Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASPs) who did not see themselves as "political" but as crusaders for an obvious good with objective means. Put differently, why democratize the governance and organization of schools when experts (WASPs) clearly believed there was one best system that would work anytime and anywhere? In the struggle for

control over schools between 1890 and 1920, among the losers were board members representing local wards, teachers, and pedagogical progressives (all representing ethnically and culturally diverse perspectives about schools) who were thoroughly defeated by a powerful conglomerate of WASPs and media muckraking of the graft of machine politics. Among the greatest losers were Blacks, South Italians, and Poles, whose encounters with the bigotry of the one best system seemed most difficult. Tyack's paraphrasing of segregationist Theodore Bilbo captured the movement to a tee: "All this talk about taking the schools out of politics is a huge joke to intelligent people.... It means nothing except to take the schools out of your politics and put them in [mine]" (p. 284). Clearly, there was never such a thing as one best system for all. While Tyack's scholarship is unquestionably first-rate, his ability to deploy strong arguments and have fun at the same time is ingenious: Whether it is brawny students in one-room school houses beating up their schoolmasters in front of 5-year olds (and being demoted by the local school board not for fighting, but losing!), school janitors engaging in espionage for superintendents who wanted to insure implementation fidelity amongst teachers, textbook companies sending "alluring women as accomplices to blackmail school officials into favoring their wares" (p. 95), or explaining the literal origin of the expression, "toe the line," Tyack seamlessly weaves these disparate pieces back into his main thesis: social control of the young through the most formidable institution of enculturation--the school. Throughout my reading of Tyack, I couldn't help but think of the annoying but popular and indiscriminate use of the term "Best Practices" (originally a business term, by the way) in educational parlance. Tyack's book reminds us of the need to take such claims with a grain of salt. Instead of taking the hard-nosed and misleading high road to an unequivocal science of education (also known as the one best system), ideals of pluralism and decentralized decision-making should be embraced by school reformers, especially if schools are to be touted as truly democratic institutions. This should be a required reading for anyone interested in urban education.

This is an easy and interesting read about the history of American public education from the perspectives of those who lived it. Much is based on the writings of people in education - letters, diaries, editorials, etc. I was saddened by how similar some of the issues in the early 1900's are to current issues. Teachers complaining about standardized tests; struggles with how to deal with immigration; what to do about poor behavior. When read in concert with current writings, I think it will leave the impression that we are rarely progressive when it comes to public education in this country.

David Tyack---like so many past and present government school critics---sees the problems and describes them well. However, he fails to see the solution: get government out of schooling. That is, go to free-market education. One delightful part of his description of the olden' days is this gem: "To many schoolmen, lay decision-making at its best tended to be inefficient meddling in the proper province of the expert; at its worst, the school system became just another source of patronage and graft to boodlers. L.H. Jones, superintendent of schools in Cleveland, complained in 1896 that 'the unscrupulous politician is the worst enemy that we now have to contend with in public education.'" (page 79) Also, I think the review by B Lack is superb.

Every urban parent and teacher wonders why it is SO difficult to create good urban schools. Funding is certainly an issue, but something else seems to be wrong, something bigger and more unchangeable. Read this book, and you will find the answer: Urban schools were organized this way on purpose. They were structured to be impersonal, bureaucratic, and unequal. Great book. Tyack ranks as one of the best U.S. historians.

Tyack is the master of educational history. To know where we are, we must know where we have been. No student of education should graduate without reading this book.

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