

ilies and encourage parents to “tuition” their children into public schools in better neighborhoods, schools, or districts, acting as a windfall for public schools, instead of their downfall?

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## THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM: EDUCATION AND THE SEARCH FOR PANACEAS

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*Reviewed by Timothy Walch*

Tom Hunt has been thinking and writing about the history of American education for more than 30 years. The author or editor of 10 books in the past 20 years, Hunt has stimulated students, scholars, and educators to think intensely about the problems that seem to plague our educational system. His new book, *The Impossible Dream*, brings together between two covers some of his best and most provocative ideas on the historical contours of the present state of our schools. It is a book that should be read and reread by every school superintendent in this country.

*The Impossible Dream* traces its roots from two classic works of educational history: Henry Perkinson's *The Imperfect Panacea* (1968) and David

B. Tyack's *The One Best System* (1974). Perkinson and Tyack articulated a propensity for educators to periodically propose sweeping sure-fire reforms to cure all the ills of American education. Indeed, it seemed as if these educators lurched from one reform to the next without ever learning from their previous experiences. "The search for one best system," noted Tyack, "has ill served the pluralistic character of American society" (p. 11).

Hunt was deeply affected by these books and by personal observations and experiences. "One afternoon," Hunt notes in the preface to this book, "I developed a list of educational panaceas, divided them up into institutions, movements, curricular models, and pedagogical techniques, and resolved to one day write a book on the subject" (p. xvi). The result is this new book.

In a series of loosely linked chapters, Hunt describes and analyzes 14 panaceas that have been fashionable since the establishment of public schooling in the 1830s. He begins, as one might expect, with the claim made by Horace Mann that "common schools were the greatest invention ever made by man" (p. 68). Hunt goes on to discuss the use of the Bible as a textbook, Americanization, the Hampton model, the era of social efficiency, life-adjustment education, the war on poverty, open education, the age of accountability, performance contracting, behavioral objectives, career education, year-round education, and school-to-work among other solutions to our educational woes. It is enough to make any educator's eyes glaze over.

In each chapter Hunt provides a dispassionate discussion of a panacea and concludes with a carefully argued synopsis. Subheadings in each chapter facilitate navigation through the thicket of ideas. Completing the book leaves the reader with mixed feelings. On the one hand, there is a certain satisfaction in knowing that our educators are so dedicated to making our schools as effective as possible. On the other hand, it is very dispiriting to discover that these same educational reformers have learned so little from past experiences: Although our educational leaders are not repeating history with their endless litany of panaceas, they show no signs of improvement.

*The Impossible Dream* also is important for its defense of conserving what is good about our schools. Hunt subscribes to a concept first proposed by Tyack in a brief essay in *Education Week* in the summer of 1999. Tyack called for more educators to come forward to preserve what is good in education, just as other citizens help to preserve the natural environment or historical and archeological sites. "Who will be there to defend the endangered species of good schools, or good educational programs," asked Tyack, "from the relentless, if zigzag, march of educational progress" (p. 68)?

Hunt has made the case that we need more "educational conservationists." *The Impossible Dream* makes the points that there are no quick fixes to improving our schools and that we must lower our expectations. Shocking as it might seem, teachers are not miracle workers and they cannot change the lives of our children without the help of parents and other concerned citizens.

*The Impossible Dream* is something of a tonic. It brings into historical context the unrealistic nature of our educational expectations. It is a book that deserves a wide audience within the educational establishment. In fact, I have a suggestion: Go out and buy a copy of *The Impossible Dream* and give it to your favorite school superintendent. You will be glad you did.

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