

Jack Jennings: A Half-Century of Education Policy Research

Congressional Insider, Think Tank Founder, and Author
on American School Reform

JACKJENNINGSDC.COM



Jack Jennings, Education Policy Expert

WHO IS JACK JENNINGS?

"Every Child Deserves a Good Education in a Public School"

Jack Jennings is one of the most influential figures in American education policy over the past half-century. His career spans three distinct phases: nearly three decades as a congressional expert, seventeen years leading a think tank, and a third chapter as an author and public intellectual.

- **27 years** as principal education expert, U.S. House of Representatives (1967–1994)
- Involved in landmark legislation: **ESEA, IDEA, Higher Education Act**
- Founder & CEO, **Center on Education Policy** (1995–2012)
- Author of **4 major books** on education reform
- Described as "the foremost expert on education policy in the U.S. House of Representatives"

From Capitol Hill to Think Tank: A Career Built on Reform



1967–1994

**Congressional Education
Expert**

Principal expert for U.S. House.
Key architect of ESEA, IDEA, and
Higher Education Act.



1995–2012

Founder & CEO, CEP

Founded Center on Education Policy.
Led influential research on NCLB and
state policies.



2012–Present

Author & Public Intellectual

Authored 4 major books.
Continues to shape debate through
articles and commentary.

Four Books That Define the Education Reform Debate

Jennings has authored four major books that trace the arc of American education reform from the origins of the standards movement to the present day.

1998

Why National Standards and Tests? Politics and the Quest for Better Schools

SAGE PUBLICATIONS

2015

Presidents, Congress, and Public Schools

HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS

2018

Politics of American Education Reform

TOKYO UNIVERSITY PRESS (JAPANESE EDITION)

2020

Fatigued by School Reform

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

Why National Standards and Tests? (1998)

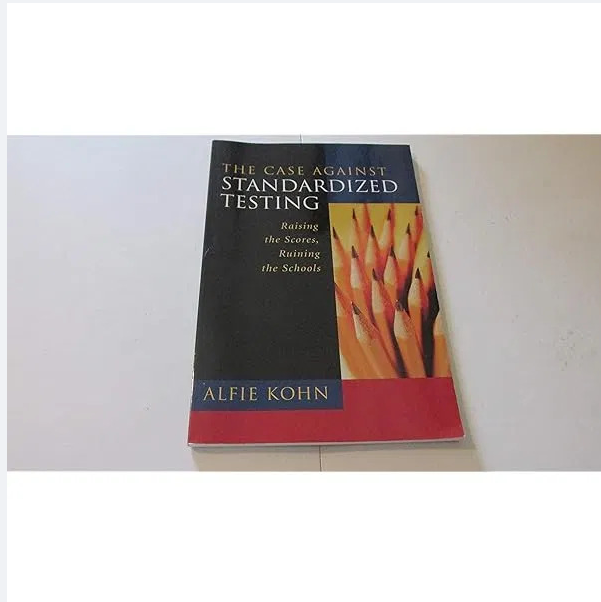
The Origins of a Movement

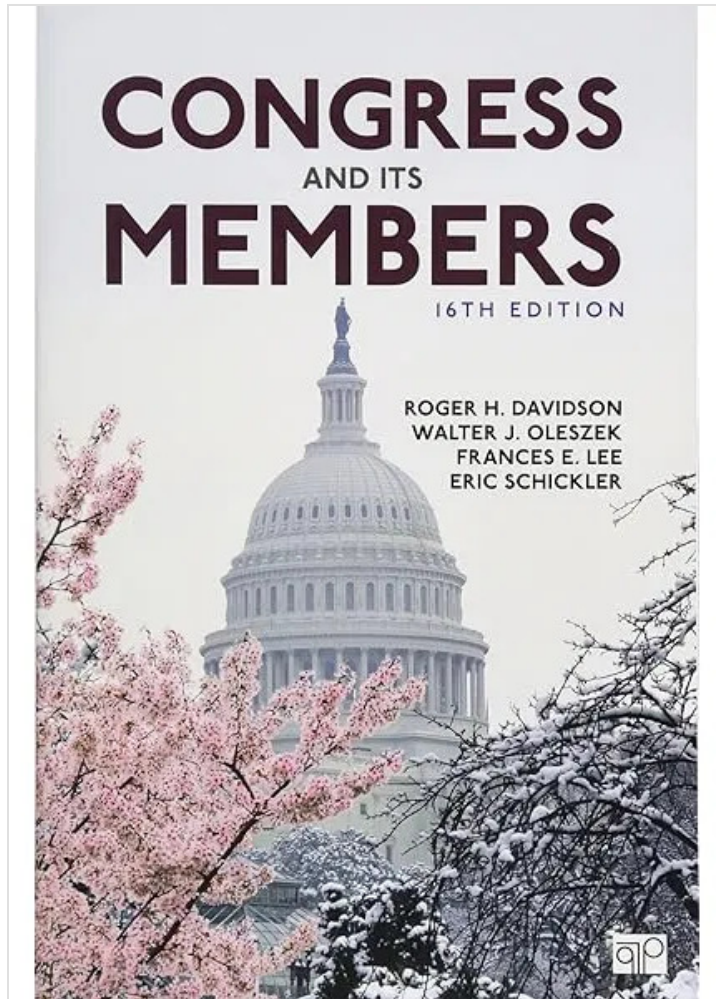
An insider's account of how the national standards movement emerged from the 1989 Education Summit. Jennings reveals how a bipartisan consensus between corporate leaders, governors, and presidents evolved into a contentious political battleground.

- ✓ **Origins:** The 1989 Education Summit convened by George H.W. Bush.
- ✓ **Bipartisan Push:** How Bush and Clinton both advanced higher standards.
- ✓ **Goals 2000:** The legislative battles and compromises in Congress.
- ✓ **Core Tension:** National standards vs. local control.

"An excellent and fair picture of the political pressures and agendas that have an impact on the development of laws."

— R. Unruh, Former Speaker, California Assembly





Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools

50 Years of Federal Policy (2015)

Published on the 50th anniversary of the ESEA, this book examines the full sweep of federal education policy from the Johnson administration through the Obama era, offering an insider's analysis of landmark legislation.

- **ESEA's Title I** was a landmark achievement for equity, though historically underfunded.
- The **1970s** represented a "golden era" of bipartisan cooperation on education.
- **Reagan's attempt** to eliminate Title I was defeated by his own party.
- **NCLB** used the wrong approach: test-and-punish without adequate support.
- Education should be reframed as a **federal civil right**.

"A remarkably unbiased, informed, and crisp story about the politics, battles, and decisions made over the past fifty years."

— **Marshall Smith, former Under-Secretary of Education**

Jack Jennings

EDUCATION POLICY, LEGISLATION, AND HISTORY

About Jack His Books Articles Contacting Him

Japanese Translation

CK JENNINGS ■ NOVEMBER 21, 2018

アメリカ教育改革のポリテイクス
公正を求めた50年の闘い

Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools:
The Politics of Education Reform
Jack Jennings

ジャック・ジェニングズ [著]
吉良 直・大桃敏行・高橋 哲 [訳]



東京大学出版会

Politics of American Education Reform: 50-Year Struggle in Search of Equity is the title of the Japanese translation of *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools* with additional content to bring the book up to date for the time of its publishing. In November 2018, this expanded translation was released in Tokyo. I want to thank the University of Tokyo Press for this opportunity, and also thank you to the Harvard Education Press for working with that university publisher to make it possible. The Harvard Education Press published the book in English in 2015.

A special appreciation goes to the three translators who worked over a year to produce a good translation. They are three professors Naoshi Kira, Toshiyuki Omomo, and Satoshi Takahashi.

advocating, education research, Presidents, Congress and the Public Schools

Politics of American Education Reform (2018)

A Global Perspective: The Japanese Translation

In 2018, the University of Tokyo Press published an expanded Japanese translation of *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools*. This edition included new material updating the analysis through 2018, demonstrating the global relevance of Jennings' insights into the American struggle for educational equity.

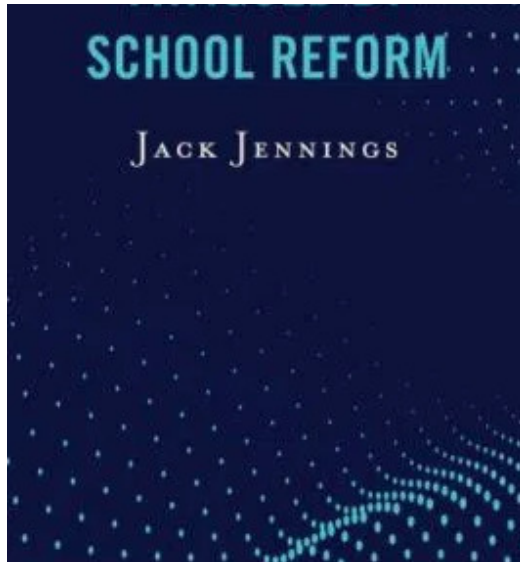
KEY DETAILS

- **Title:** Politics of American Education Reform: 50-Year Struggle in Search of Equity
- **Publisher:** University of Tokyo Press
- **Translators:** Professors Naoshi Kira, Toshiyuki Omomo, and Satoshi Takahashi
- **Significance:** First major translation of Jennings' work into a foreign language

"Most likely to be a must-read book... [by someone] personally involved in the legislative processes of numerous education laws."

— Prof. Akio Kitano, Nihon University

Fatigued by School Reform (2020): Why 50 Years of Reform Have Fallen Short



THE CORE CRITIQUE

Reformers have consistently ignored the two most powerful predictors of success:
Parental Background & Teacher Quality.

The Four Failed Reform Waves

1. Equity

1960s–70s

Add-on programs for disadvantaged students.

Failed because: Limited funding; didn't improve the broader system.

2. Standards

1980s–90s

Setting academic standards.

Failed because: No accountability mechanism for districts.

3. Accountability

2001–2015 (NCLB)

Test-and-punish strategy.

Failed because: Wrong approach; insufficient funding; too punitive.

4. Choice

1992–Present

Charter schools and vouchers.

Failed because: No significant academic advantage over public schools.

The Coleman Report (1966): The Root Cause Reformers Keep Ignoring

Central to Jennings' analysis is the landmark Coleman Report, which found that school resources matter far less than two key factors. Jennings argues that 50 years of reform have failed because they consistently ignore these predictors.

1. Parental Background

Socioeconomic status, education level, and family engagement are the strongest predictors of student achievement.



2. Teacher Quality

The preparation, effectiveness, and retention of teachers are the most critical in-school factors for student success.



JENNINGS' CONCLUSION

"Until reforms directly address these two factors, no amount of testing, accountability, or school choice will produce lasting improvement."

The Federal Role in Education: A Delicate Balance

Historical Context

Constitutional Design

Education is delegated to states, but states historically passed funds to locals without setting meaningful policy.

The 1970s "Golden Era"

Productive bipartisan cooperation. Targeted federal aid for disadvantaged students without micromanaging local schools.

The NCLB Era (2001–2015)

Federal overreach through "test-and-punish" accountability that trampled state authority without producing results.

Jennings' Vision for the Federal Role

- ✓ **Guarantee Civil Rights**
Ensure equal educational opportunity is treated as a fundamental civil right.
- ✓ **Support State Capacity**
Help states administer schools effectively rather than bypassing them.
- ✓ **Avoid Micromanagement**
Do NOT set national curriculum or dictate local instruction.
- ✓ **Targeted Funding**
Fund programs for disadvantaged students (Title I, IDEA, Head Start).
- ✓ **Promote Teacher Quality**
Invest in professional development and compensation.

Private Schools vs. Public Schools

Evidence Over Ideology

The Common Claim

"Proponents of private education and vouchers argue that private schools inherently produce superior academic results and that school choice will lift student achievement through competition."

The Research Evidence

- ✓ **10 Years of Data:** CEP reviews of voucher programs in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, and D.C. found no clear academic advantage.
- ✓ **The Real Driver:** Apparent success is often due to family background, not the school itself.
- ✓ **No "Secret Sauce":** Private schools do not outperform public schools when student demographics are matched.

CORE RESEARCH FINDING

Children from the same socioeconomic background perform equally well in public and private schools. The "private school advantage" disappears when family background is controlled for.

What Must Change: A Blueprint for Genuine Reform

Address Socioeconomic Factors

1

Create a fairer economy with better jobs.
Expand access to high-quality pre-school and afterschool programs.

Elevate Teacher Quality

2

Upgrade teaching as a profession. Raise salaries to attract talent and improve preparation and development.

Increase Parental Engagement

3

Use technology and community programs to bridge the engagement gap for working parents.

Redefine the Federal Role

4

Guarantee equal educational opportunity as a civil right.
Ensure equitable funding without micromanaging instruction.

Reject Test-and-Punish

5

Replace punitive accountability systems with supportive frameworks that help schools improve rather than labeling them.

Legacy and Recognition: An Insider Who Told the Truth

Jack Jennings' work is recognized across the political spectrum as a rare combination of insider knowledge and intellectual honesty. From conservative scholars to education historians, his analysis is cited as authoritative and essential.

"The ultimate insider who ran the House Education and Labor Committee... his perspective is hugely informative."

DIANE RAVITCH

Education Historian

"A remarkably unbiased, informed, and crisp story about the politics, battles, and decisions made over the past fifty years."

MARSHALL SMITH

Former Under-Secretary of Education

"Brilliant... a masterpiece of brevity."

CHUCK QUIGLEY

Center for Civic Education

"Most likely to be a must-read book... [by someone] personally involved in the legislative processes."

PROF. AKIO KITANO

Nihon University (Japanese Journal of Educ. Research)

Conclusion: The Unfinished Work of American Education Reform

After fifty years of shaping and critiquing policy, Jack Jennings concludes that school reform has been oversold, misdirected, and underfunded—but remains essential. The challenge is not to abandon the effort, but to redirect it toward the root causes of inequality.

THE CORE MESSAGE

"Reform must be redirected from test-and-punish accountability and school choice toward addressing the socioeconomic factors and teacher quality issues that actually determine student success."

Further Reading and Resources

Books by Jack Jennings

- **Fatigued by School Reform**
Rowman & Littlefield, 2020
- **Politics of American Education Reform: 50-Year Struggle in Search of Equity**
Tokyo University Press, 2018
- **Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools**
Harvard Education Press, 2015
- **Why National Standards and Tests?**
Sage Publications, 1998

Key Articles & Web

- **"It's Time to Redefine the Federal Role in K-12 Education"**
Phi Delta Kappan, 2018
- **"Federal Education Reform Has Largely Failed. Unfortunately, We Still Need It"**
Education Week, 2024
- **"Ten Big Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on Public Schools"**
Phi Delta Kappan, 2006



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