



NEW BOOK CALLS FOR RETHINKING THE AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM TO CREATE A FERTILE ENVIRONMENT FOR LASTING REFORM

Greenfield school reform: (definition) Strategy to create a fertile environment conducive to entrepreneurial, effective new solutions.

—Frederick M. Hess, *Education Unbound*

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WASHINGTON, D.C.—What if the key to breakthrough school improvement was not mandating complicated new solutions built on an elusive combination of standards, pedagogical practices and assessment; but rather dislodging entrenched bureaucratic barriers and rethinking restrictive education norms entirely? What if the system is the problem? What if we were free to start from scratch?

In his new book, *Education Unbound: The Promise and Practice of Greenfield Schooling* (ASCD Books, 2010), Frederick M. Hess explores those questions and advocates an entrepreneurial approach to education reform—an approach focused on supporting outstanding teaching and effective learning. In *Education Unbound*, Hess pinpoints reform efforts and new practices that, despite their successes, have failed to change education on a broad scale because of the intrinsic barriers within our current system.

Hess says that instead of introducing more reforms, we need to create an environment—a greenfield—that allows creative problem solving to take root.

“Today’s districts and state school systems are so hobbled by rules, statutes, contracts, outmoded technology and stubborn cultures that they cannot effectively employ new tools and approaches,” Hess says. “The solution is not to force districts to imitate ‘what has worked,’ but to free school services providers and new organizations to expand, start anew, and deliver new answers.”

Hess’s greenfield approach regards school improvement as something policymakers and education reform advocates should *enable* rather than *do*. Greenfield is a term typically used by investors, engineers, or builders to refer to an area where there are unobstructed, wide-open opportunities to invent or build. In schooling, creating a greenfield environment requires scrubbing away our assumptions about districts, schoolhouses, teacher training, and other familiar arrangements so we might use resources, talent, and technology to support excellent teaching and effective learning in smarter, better ways.

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To bolster his new approach to reform, Hess recounts stories of dynamic organizations and individuals who are finding promising ways to address the dire state of our education system. Their successful efforts can be attributed to five key rules. Hess recommends reformers:

1. Remove formal and informal barriers that stifle creative problem solving.
2. Find, utilize, and retain talented individuals and organizations.
3. Increase access to available capital for promising new ventures.
4. Create incentives for more encompassing and comprehensive quality control.
5. Increase and encourage public-private investment in research and development.

“For all their virtues, schools in the United States are not noted for their embrace of creative problem solvers,” Hess says. “Greenfield reform rethinks critical educational components such as personnel assumptions, teacher pay and licensure in order to remove barriers that keep talented educators from entering the profession.” Hess adds, “Education reformers today need to ask themselves what they can do to reduce obstacles; foster smart private and public quality control; and promote talent, capital, and networks. What laws might be usefully stripped from the books as outdated and ill-suited for the twenty-first century? What rules governing textbook procurement or teacher credentials might once have made sense but now stifle problem-solvers?”

Frederick M. Hess is a resident scholar and the director of educational policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. He is also the Executive Editor of *Education Next* and a research associate in the Education Policy and Governance program at Harvard University. Formerly a public high school teacher in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and a professor of education at the University of Virginia, his previous books include *Spinning Wheels* (1998), *Revolution at the Margins* (2002), and *Common Sense School Reform* (2004).

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