

# Book Review: The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling

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Worries about the quality of public schooling in America are not new. Present since the mid-nineteenth century, the issue became a perennial one after 1918, the year in which elementary school attendance became compulsory in every state. *The Allure of Order* attempts to trace the cyclical efforts to 'order' American schooling over the course of the twentieth century, from 1920s reform efforts up through *No Child Left Behind* and the current school accountability movement. **Michael Bassey** finds a powerful academic treatise written lucidly which demands a wide readership in this country.

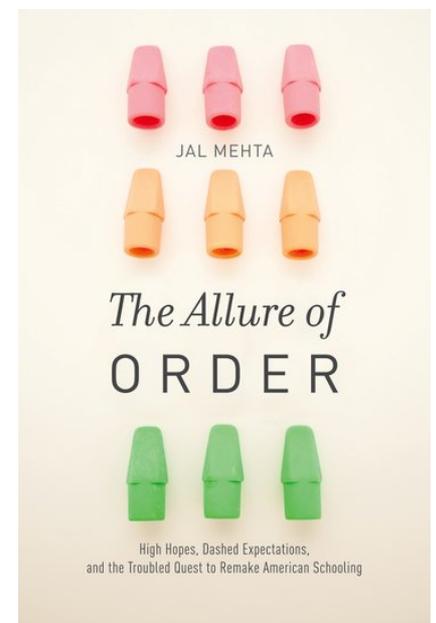
**The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling. Jal Mehta. Oxford University Press. May 2013.**

## Find this book:

[Jal Mehta](#) describes four stages in the external efforts to 'order' American schooling. He starts with the 'Progressive Era' of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a localised and highly varied system of one-room schoolhouses was seen as in crisis by "muck-raking journalists". Influenced by the then ascendant managerial ideas of Taylorism, schools were grouped under district superintendents with some standardization imposed by testing.

In 1966, the Coleman Report, showing that differences in outcomes were more attributable to family background and peer groups than school work, led to a focus on the relationship between school inputs and outputs: it marked the beginning of the school accountability movement, with critics complaining that 'the measurable was crowding out the meaningful'. This 'standards movement' made a little progress, state by state, but was overshadowed by battles over desegregation and community control.

Then came the bombshell report, *A Nation At Risk*, in 1983, that saw education as an economic development issue that was failing in terms of international competition. Suddenly state legislatures and governors were clamouring for higher standards in an area that they had hitherto ignored. "By linking educational and economic concerns it created broad and deep political momentum for school reform; by emphasising high standards for all, it shifted the discussion from high-poverty students to all students; by focusing on the failings of school and not society, it narrowed the scope of potential reforms exclusively on school improvement; and by measuring schools by quantifiable results, it accelerated a trend towards test-based accountability that continued unabated." A consequence that persists is that "such values of schooling as personal growth, critical thinking, social justice, and character education have lost ground to a skill-building vision of schooling".



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In 2001 the federal government, with strong bipartisan support, enacted the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which set out to ensure that by 2014 all children would be proficient in reading and mathematics. For the first time, the federal government “required states to hold schools accountable for meeting prescribed standards and to impose an escalating series of consequences on schools that failed to do so”. But now, a decade later it has been described by some as ‘toxic’ because it “has not provided schools with needed tools to create higher quality schooling” for poor and minority students. Some schools devote much of the school year to test preparation and there have been widespread cheating scandals in several states.



The quintessential yellow schoolbuses of America, lined up back at their desert depot. Credit: [Tom Blackwell](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Mehta’s title, *The Allure of Order*, is a clever summary of the problems that he perceives as recurring themes throughout this history of American education. There has been continuing faith in the tools of scientific management, taken from American industry, as a mechanism for improving schools, “despite the fact that both experience and research has told us that teaching is not like factory work, that it requires skill and discretion as opposed to following of rules and procedures”. Attempts to decrease the variation in schools by specifying easily measured outcomes and raising the stakes for achieving these outcomes encourages learning for the tests rather than all round learning.

As a social scientist and academic scholar, Mehta constantly asks challenging questions. Particularly pertinent is why has the teaching profession been unable to take control of its sphere of action? Why has it regularly succumbed to external movements for reform? His short answer is that teaching has been institutionalized as a “semi-profession”. “It lacks lengthy training, a distinctive knowledge base, an ability to exclude unqualified practitioners, and standards of practice that govern its daily work ... [and does] not possess the kind of guild power seen in stronger professions.” As a result teachers “primary responsibility [is] to implement the ideas created by others”.

These ideas are discussed in an extensive and scholarly discourse that, in pursuing the ‘allure of order’, explores the power of ideas as paradigms that shape politics. When a new paradigm arises “Newspapers, legislative debates, and other forums where issues are debated and decided take up issues different from those they did before ... Existing actors’ identities are reshaped as the new problem definition changes the way people think about an issue. ... New actors and groups are also created.”

But, unlike a number of current accounts of the problems of education, Mehta goes further by offering guidance for the route to universal good schools. He discusses four elements needed for a successful school system: practice-relevant knowledge, strong human capital, school-level processes of improvement, and external support and accountability. He ends rather wistfully looking for new institutions to try new approaches and old institutions to reform themselves: "We can only hope that they have learned from the lessons of the past and seek not to control but to empower, creating the infrastructure upon which talented practitioner can create the good schools of the future."

Although it is about the development of education in the United States there are many parallels with the way that education is being developed (misdeveloped?) in England. It is a powerful academic treatise written lucidly which, being pleasingly free of jargon, deserves, nay demands, a wide readership in this country.

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**Michael Bassey** is an emeritus professor of Nottingham Trent University and an academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. His methodological text *Case Study Research in Educational Settings* has sold over 5000 copies. [Read more reviews by Michael.](#)

