observes that charters typically operate at about a third
the scale of average public schools. Does the scale differ-
ence reflect the lack of start-up capital or does it reflect
a judgement about the adverse effect of scale on per-
formance? The study hints that charters must provide
transportation, lunch, and special education. It would be
helpful to know how the cost to charters of providing
these services compares to conventionally organized
schools.

The study is clearly written, gives primary focus to
political issues, and despite a favorable disposition
toward charter schools, draws limited conclusions.
Deeper economic analysis would be welcome.

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Fixing Urban Schools; Paul T. Hill and Mary Beth
Celio; Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C.,

Imagine this situation: your local school system has
failed, the state government is threatening to put the
courts in charge of the school district, and you are a
community leader who has been called upon to save the
city schools. What do you do? What do you do?

Authors Hill and Celio have written Fixing Urban
Schools to help such people. They discuss many reform
ideas proposed to save schools: higher standards, teacher
development, thematic school designs, site-based man-
agement, charter schools, school contracting, and vouch-
ers. Their self-stated primary contribution is to point out
1) that every reform proposal has a zone of wishful
thinking: things that the reforms can’t cause but need to
happen to be successful, and 2) that some reform pro-
posals cause the events needed in other reform pro-
posals’ zones of wishful thinking. They conclude that
only a multi-pronged attack consisting of multiple
reforms will maximize the probability of success.

Reforming schools is not easy. Finding common
ground and being able to discuss ideological hot buttons
is essential. The authors point out that the means differ,
but reformers agree that schools must be simpler, parents
and teachers must share responsibility for education, and
standards should be high. Many reform proposals like
vouchers are such politically sensitive issues that their
mere mention can shut down dialogue. The authors stress
that no single reform is so powerful that it can’t be dis-
cussed. Furthermore, many reforms can be implemented
on the margin, they’re not all-or-nothing proposals. Most
of all, we simply don’t have empirical evidence on
whether these reforms work. So far all we really have is
theory.

The strong point of this book is that it is relevant to
all situations. It realizes that what plays in Pittsburgh
may not cut it in Cleveland because of different problems
and political situations. It emphasizes general concepts
and good advice that must be tailored to the situation.
For instance, it advises reform leaders to have separate
teams dealing with daily crisis management and long-
term planning. Failure to do so means you’ll never get
past the crisis management stage. A good short-term goal
is to increase reading scores. This will show that you
can get results and will instill confidence in the reform
efforts. It describes how to get help from outside organi-
izations. It warns against adopting every special program
that’s out there, preferring instead that schools only
adopt programs that fit into a coherent complementary
strategy. Do not cave in to the special agendas of every
vendor or political group. Ask for flexibility from the
state and national governments: funds are often avail-
able, but the rules for spending them are stifling. They
can make exceptions to their rules.

Reformers are tempted to get reform ideas from the
groups that run the schools, such as the principals, teach-
ers’ union, and PTA. Hill and Celio say reformers should
listen to these groups, but shouldn’t give them control.
They have a vested interest in the status quo and cannot
be trusted to enact honest reform.

The authors point out, “Despite the fact that no reform
proposal has a corner on truth, it is clear that many pro-
posals have a piece of it.” These reform strategies should
be used in conjunction with each other. They should be
tailored to meet the specific situation the school faces.
The authors discuss various combinations of reform pro-
posals and how they would work synergistically to
improve the incentives, capabilities, and opportunities
of schools.

This is a well-written, useful book for people thrust
into the fires of fixing urban schools. The authors drop
a tantalizing hint of a future book that describes how
seven school districts’ reform efforts are going. That
book, too, would be useful, allowing reformers to learn
from other schools’ experiences. It’s tempting to ask Fix-
ing Urban Schools to provide more specific advice. As
the authors say, though, 1) one size does not fit all, 2)
there’s only theory on what works and what doesn’t, and
3) providing general guidelines means the book is appli-
cable to situations that all reform leaders face.

If you are a community leader who has been asked to
rescue a failing school system, this is a valuable book.
Buy it. Read it. Live it. Yours is a difficult task, but a
task critical to the future of our society.

This well-written volume, sponsored by the Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies Series, seeks to critically assess Japanese practices in vocational education training (VET). Comparisons of the Japanese VET experience with that in Britain provides useful lessons on improvement for both countries. A preface calls into question general assumptions regarding VET training that are not maintained in Japan. Whereas most countries require tests and certification of vocational skills only in the presence of market failure, the Japanese undertake certification to increase standards of competence and raise national efficiency. Instead of testing and certification being carried out by practitioners of a particular field, it is the customer, often with the state as its agent, who has the primary interest in maintaining high standards.

Eight chapters cover the general school system and the sorting of students to various schools, formal and informal vocational training, on-the job and off-the job training, resource allocation for VET, and VET policies carried out by the various ministries. A primary function of the state in Japan is to ensure basic training of all citizens. A consequence of this mission is a thorough sorting of individuals across the spectrum of perceived ability and a “boy scout badge” certification system. This is in contrast to the British view of “whole role” learning in VET. The vocational training process in Japan is highly influenced by the practice of lifetime employment and internal Japanese labor markets. Industrial engineers are heavily involved in part-time teaching and the design of curricula and skill tests.

Interestingly, vocational schools require greater breadth of knowledge in basic subjects, such as math, science, and English, than technical training classes. For example, knowledge of anatomy and physiology is required for barbers and hairdressers to pass their certification tests. The lack of optional classes appears to be motivated by a public good view of education and a philosophy that spending time on subjects that one does not enjoy is good training for life.

While the presumption of lifetime employment in Japan provides a strong incentive for investment in training, firms typically spend more on recruiting workers. Selection criteria concentrate on a potential worker’s ability to learn, rather than their specific competencies. Underlying this selection process is the view that if the right people are chosen, learning will organize itself. Once employed, a worker’s training may consist of self-study through correspondence courses, learning through job rotation and quality circles, and general morale and loyalty building. The prospect of lifetime employment gives employees a greater stake in the firm’s success and helps motivate workers to upgrade and acquire new skills for the good of the firm.

Most tests of vocational skills are officially sanctioned for both white collar and blue collar occupations. Tests can usually be taken at two levels of skill certification, with some tests offering a third, lowest level, to help validate the competence of young people with little work experience. While economists might want open skill tests to prevent labor market barriers, it is common to require certain levels of general education for test taking eligibility. These requirements arise from an educational establishment that wants to maintain demand for its services. Not surprisingly, little protest is heard from those who already hold skill certificates.

The book ends with a chapter on policies and prospects in vocational training. The bursting of the asset price bubble in 1990 led to a severe recession, slow economic growth, voluntary early retirement schemes, and questioning of Japanese internal labor markets and lifetime employment practices. Yet, for all these problems, employment and relative wages across educational and skill levels have changed little. In addition, the various Ministries have paid scant attention to the potential for labor market barriers and allocative inefficiencies arising from skill certification. A loss of national self-confidence has caused some Japanese to ask “Where are our Bill Gates?” Given the seemingly inflexible Japanese labor market coupled with the fine slicing of young people into various educational and labor market segments, one might plausibly answer “He’s taking the level II welding test for Tokyo Mechanics.”