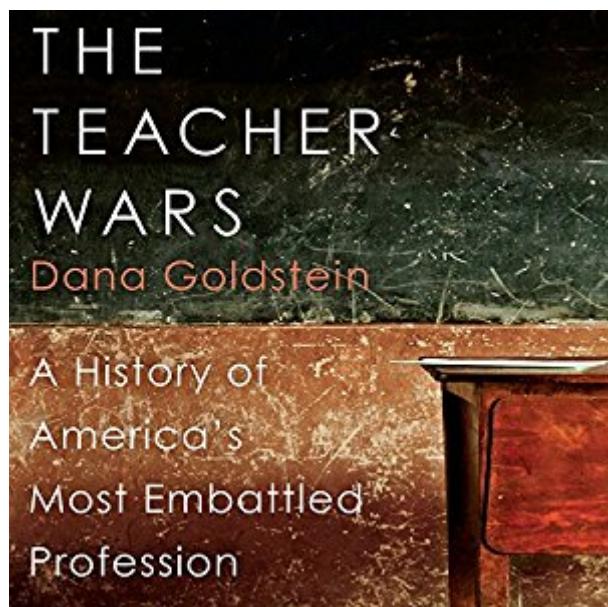


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The Teacher Wars: A History Of America's Most Embattled Profession



Synopsis

A brilliant young scholar's history of 175 years of teaching in America shows that teachers have always borne the brunt of shifting, often impossible expectations. In other nations, public schools are one thread in a quilt that includes free universal child care, health care, and job training. Here, schools are the whole cloth. Today we look around the world at countries like Finland and South Korea, whose students consistently outscore Americans on standardized tests, and wonder what we are doing wrong. Dana Goldstein first asks the often-forgotten question: "How did we get here?" She argues that we must take the historical perspective, understanding the political and cultural baggage that is tied to teaching, if we have any hope of positive change. In her lively, character-driven history of public teaching, Goldstein guides us through American education's many passages, including the feminization of teaching in the 1800s and the fateful growth of unions, and shows that the battles fought over nearly two centuries echo the very dilemmas we cope with today. Goldstein shows that recent innovations like Teach for America, merit pay, and teacher evaluation via student testing are actually as old as public schools themselves. Goldstein argues that long-fester ambivalence about teachers - are they civil servants or academic professionals? - and unrealistic expectations that the schools alone should compensate for poverty's ills have driven the most ambitious people from becoming teachers and sticking with it. In America's past, and in local innovations that promote the professionalization of the teaching corps, Goldstein finds answers to an age-old problem.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book provides a look at the history of who became teachers, how schools were funded, why schools are traditionally underfunded, how the "profession" has changed over the years, how the politics governing school systems has changed and why. It reviews current efforts to reform education, and what research says about methodology. Goldstein has put a ton of research into the book and collaborated with many experts to put together a thought provoking look at the public school system and the teacher's role in education. I think teachers, parents, administrators, and school board members who want to improve their schools would find the book informative and well worth the read. It gives a broad based look at schools across the nation and uses the personal anecdotes from scores of people involved in education over the years to make the book real. As a former teacher, it was hard to refrain from turning this review into a rant and giving my personal opinions, but I would like to point out one thing. In my career I had twelve different principals. Only one ever gave me constructive criticism and only two gained my respect. In my experience, NCLB allowed mediocre administrators to keep thumbs on staff and turned teachers into automatons willing to do busy work. Teachers too often have become scapegoats for the ills of society instead of getting the respect they deserve. The majority of hard-working, dedicated, and effective teachers suffer the consequences caused by the small minority of bad teachers who administrators and colleges have failed to winnow out of the educational system.

Sometimes you read something that is so impressive that you wonder, "How did she do that?" This was my reaction to Goldstein's book. It has so much in it about teachers, the history of teaching, teaching reform, schools, emphasis on testing, and so forth, but is so analytical and focused--so non-screed-like--that I just walked away and said, "Wow. How did she do that?" and "That was encyclopedic." For me, the best part was the earlier history of the US teaching profession. The most depressing part involves the four iterations of school reform from 1983 onward, since it is not clear that anything has really improved. I was fascinated to learn that 70% of American parents really like their schools (I had thought the percentage was much lower). Having worked in a charter school, I am aware of how teachers can get exploited by this "new" model, and it does appear, in fact, that some charter school companies are not simply union-averse, but also union-busting. The last chapter has 11 "recommendations" or "what would be better" suggestions. These were all fairly predictable. I am now on to Ravitch's *Reign of Error*.

In "Society and Solitude," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The true test of civilization

is, not the census, nor the size of the cities, nor the crops — but the kind of man the country turns out. With writing that educates and entertains, Dana Goldstein gives the reader a story reflecting the character of the US through the prism of our education system and how that character was formed over the last two centuries. She has crafted a robust, compelling narrative explaining how the US came to be the richest nation in the world with such a mixed bag of successes and failures in our children's schools. Her research is as thorough as one could hope when dealing with such a volatile topic, and while she offers her views at the end, by the time she does, the reader should rightly believe the advice to be an informed assessment by a competent observer. She explains well the wins and losses of the brightest luminaries in education through US history, framing and accurately describing them within the US society of their day. Embedded in this brilliant book is the story of early America, the expansion to the West, the collapse of slavery, the rise of feminism, the civil rights movement, the power of politics to include the influence of the far left and right, and the ebb and flow of caring associated with how we teach our children. She shows new ideas are old ideas (should schools teach education or train vocations) and how all approaches to schooling our kids were and are subject to the economics of the day. Goldstein has given us a full measure of how our nation is turning out the men and women who will carry the US into the future, and, with our immense wealth considered, we come up wanting but not without hope.

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