

[washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)

## A Beach Book to Impress Your Friends

By Jay Mathews  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Tuesday, June 21, 2005; 9:36 AM

Few people ever consult this column for summer reading suggestions. That is a shame, because I have a million of them. You think an education wonk like me doesn't love a racy novel while sipping lemonade, listening to the waves and sniffing sunblock?

Unfortunately, the literary experts over at the Book World section of The Post are a sensitive bunch and might take offense at my invading their turf. So let me recommend just one book that did not do much for my libido, but told me many interesting things I did not know about schools, and even had a travel theme and a pretty picture of the ocean and seabirds on the cover.

The book is "Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform," edited by George Washington University education policy research professor Iris C. Rotberg and published by Scarecrow Education. It is a 431-page paperback, available on Amazon.com for \$30.74 (I admit that's pricey, but shipping is free) or as low as \$23.50 for a used copy. And since it was published last year, it qualifies for the Better Late Than Never Book Club, my selection of fine works I was too lazy and disorganized to read when they first came out.

The book is, in essence, a world tour of public education in the early 21st century. That might not sound so interesting to some of you, but for me it was a revelation. For every teaching and learning issue that divides this country, the book shows that several other countries are having the same argument. For every cry of despair at the assorted failures of American schools, Rotberg introduces a host of nations -- including some that American critics admire -- who are hearing the same complaints about their education systems from their own experts.

Ever since I began writing about schools two decades ago, I have heard people say we should model ourselves after the Japanese, with their high standards, good teaching and superior motivational techniques. But Ryo Watanabe's chapter in the Rotberg book says Japanese policy makers have begun to worry about "too much emphasis on conformity" and are "implementing reforms to promote individualization and diversification so that children can learn to think, judge and act independently." Some of the Japanese reforms, like less emphasis on tests and more on projects, sound suspiciously like what many American educators have been trying to do for years.

I was a seventh grader in 1957 when Sputnik went up and pundits began saying the United States needed a national approach to education and could no longer afford its quaint fondness for local control of schools. Yet in "Balancing Change and Tradition" I learn the Russians -- as well as several other countries with centralized school systems --

are now going in the opposite direction. "There is no doubt that the post-Soviet decentralization of the education system has the potential to increase efficiency and accountability by providing greater autonomy to regions, municipalities and schools," said Mary Canning and Stephen T. Kerr.

China is the foreign country I know best. When I lived there 25 years ago, school children sat in neat rows with rigid posture, memorized their lessons (and their difficult writing system) and wrote down everything their teachers said. Now, according to Kai-ming Cheng, "the suggestion from central curriculum developers" is to "return the time to the students," which means they want "teachers to talk less and allow students to participate more in classes." They also want teachers "to explore alternative solutions and answers to alternative ways of presenting the same answer."

The book explores surprising changes in policy in a dozen other countries -- South Africa, Chile, Germany, France, Turkey, Sweden, Israel, Singapore, Canada, New Zealand, England and Australia.

I finished "Balancing Change and Tradition" reassured that no matter how often we Americans envy schools in other countries, many of those countries' pundits don't think they are such great examples. American students do poorly on some international tests, but some of the countries who beat us, particularly in Europe, don't think the results make them look that great. And they argue over the validity of such tests just as we do.

If you are looking for one of those feel-good summer books, where Tom Clancy heroes defeat two or three countries over a weekend with a few clicks on a computer, this might work for you. Rotberg and her chapter authors understand our flaws, but acknowledge that many foreigners admire the American economy for its flexibility and creativity, and think that may have something to do with the variety and innovative character of our schools.

Walt Gardner, a retired California teacher who sends me thoughtful e-mails and shows up often on letters to the editor pages, gives "Balancing Change and Tradition" five stars in his Amazon.com review. He says "it's too bad that Bill Gates didn't read Rotberg's book before addressing the National Governor's Association," because the billionaire might have thought twice about saying U.S. high schools were broken.

Some parts of the book you might want to skim. Many of the authors are college professors or World Bank staffers who love complicated sentences with passive constructions. Some of the chapters read more like political tracts, with the same side winning every argument.

But "Balancing Change and Tradition" ends with a well-written and even-handed summary of the state of American education by journalist and author Peter Schrag, and a deft analysis of the chapters by Rotberg herself.

Displaying such a book on the beach will win you, at the very least, a few respectful glances. And if you are journeying overseas this summer, what better conversation starter could you have than: "I just read you are trying to fix your schools. How's that working out?"

© 2005 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive