

**Book Review**

# In the Crossfire: Marcus Foster and the Troubled History of American School Reform

John P. Spencer

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At first glance the most striking aspect of John Spencer's book is its form. Balancing biography with social and political history, John Spencer uses the story of Marcus Foster to flesh out and articulate dominant themes in the long struggle for urban school reform in America. Spencer's thoughtful analysis of urban education offers much more than methodological innovation, though, just as Foster's story offers much more than the sensational details of his death. While best known for his 1973 assassination at the hands of the Symbionese Liberation Army, the self-proclaimed American revolutionary group that later became famous for kidnapping media heiress Patty Hearst, Foster left behind a notable career as a groundbreaking teacher and administrator. After spearheading impressive turnarounds at several Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, schools, he went on to become the first African American superintendent of the Oakland, California, Unified School District. Following Foster's ascendant career path chronologically, Spencer puts together a thorough and compelling assessment of social history and educational policy in post-World War II America that has much to offer educators, historians, and most of all, perhaps, policymakers.

Spencer charts Foster's life path from his childhood in inner-city Philadelphia and his time at Cheyney State Teacher's College in Pennsylvania to his career as a teacher and principal in Philadelphia's public school system and finally, his critical—if sadly truncated—stint as a superintendent in Oakland. He weds the chronology of Foster's life to the history of key reform movements such as intergroup education, bringing students with diverse backgrounds together to emphasize their ability to work together rather than their differences, and compensatory education, a raft of programs designed to address perceived educational and even cultural deficits in some students. This innovative approach works neatly to organize the wide range of material Spencer folds into this rich text. The biography is most compelling in Spencer's early chapters, where he does an excellent job using Foster's youth to frame the challenges of urban education from the student's point of view. Drawing on an impressive array of oral histories, Spencer offers a vivid picture of Foster's upbringing, emphasizing a highly motivated mother who supervised her children closely, pushing them to achieve in school and making sure they were involved in a diverse range of cultural activities. Foster, as Spencer points out, "fulfilled his mother's expectations of academic achievement," while, at the same time, cultivated a set of social interests that revealed him as "not always the straitlaced son his mother groomed him to

be” (p. 30). Straitlaced or not, Foster excelled in high school, earning high marks and a scholarship for college. After graduation, though, Cheyney and the prospects of a teaching career represented one of the few viable options. Spencer suggests this likely was not Foster’s first choice, providing a stark reminder that even for a high achieving young black man, America in the 1930s and 1940s offered far more opportunities to fail than to succeed.

At other times, Spencer’s use of biography is less consistent. With some topics, such as Foster’s early teaching career, Spencer confronts a lack of sources. With others, such as Foster’s struggle to strike a balance between his family life and an increasingly busy career, he struggles to integrate personal details with his broader analysis of educational issues and cultural trends. Most of the time, though, Spencer’s methodology provides a clear narrative focus, one that gives useful shape to his detailed articulation of major policy shifts. For instance, in the second chapter, Spencer offers a thorough assessment of Foster’s work as the principal of Dunbar, an all-black elementary school in Philadelphia. Describing Foster’s efforts to combat low student achievement levels, including a heavy reliance on local community members as donors and volunteers, Spencer manages to offer a ground-level view that helps contextualize broader social movements in compensatory education. He examines Foster’s intergroup education program at Dunbar, which included cultural enrichment outings for students and summer homework assignments for teachers with reading lists that were designed to develop a deeper understanding of the students they worked with. Spencer demonstrates how Foster’s program successfully “bridged the dichotomy between ‘blaming schools and ‘blaming the victim’” (p. 56).

Foster’s work at Dunbar and other school sites reveals an educator who was ahead of his time in focusing on achievement gaps and accountability. At the same time, Spencer argues persuasively that Foster’s greatest legacy remains his advocacy of a balanced approach to educational reform that current American policy efforts, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 or Race to the Top (2013), too often fail to reflect. By all accounts, Foster was an inspirational leader who proved remarkably adept at pulling together diverse groups of stakeholders to make schools like Dunbar and Simon Gratz High School, also in Philadelphia, into dynamic learning communities. Still, as Spencer emphasizes repeatedly, inspirational leaders are not enough and public schools are in no way a panacea for the problems posed by urban poverty. Marcus Foster knew this all too well and his success relied on demanding accountability “not only from educators, but from families, taxpayers, and political and economic institutions as well” (p. 11). This represents Foster’s most valuable contribution to current school reform debates, providing, as Spencer puts it, a critical “lesson for current policymakers who would take aim at the achievement gap in American schools without addressing the full range of school and non-school factors that have created it” (p. 11).

In his all too brief time at Oakland, Foster moved closer to achieving his vision for shared accountability in education, instilling an ambitious three-tiered structure called the Master Plan Citizens Committee (MPCC). A massive collection of task forces and councils, Foster’s MPCC represented an innovative model of community controlled schooling that stressed inclusivity and pulled together a diverse group of actors to address the underlying social issues confronting urban school reform. A mixed success in its early stages—the committee was hampered, at times, by predictable bureaucratic inefficiency—the MPCC suggested a bright future for an educational system built on consensus and widespread community involvement. While his reform efforts in Oakland were brutally curtailed, their early promise suggests an educational model that demands accountability without pandering to divisive politics. As Spencer exhorts, this is one critical area where Foster’s most important lessons have gone largely unheeded.

While accountability plays a powerful role in the contemporary rhetoric of education reform in America, all too often that rhetoric makes little effort at consensus, indulging instead “the damaging tendency to single out educators and ignore the impact of external forces on the performance of schools and students” (p. 225).

At times, Spencer seems relentless in hammering home this central theme, stressing the inability to reform urban schools without launching an inclusive and encompassing effort to address the needs of the community as a whole. Given the failure of current policymakers to learn from educators like Foster, this urgency is understandable. Some of Foster’s most visible achievements in Philadelphia came at Simon Gratz High School, a place he helped turn from a symbol of low-performing urban schools into a success story and local media darling in the late-1960s. By 2011, though, Gratz had again become a symbol of failure and was taken over by Mastery Charter Schools, a growing network of charter schools that operate in southern New Jersey and the greater Philadelphia area. Charter schools, of course, have become the latest popular quick fix for the myriad problems confronting America’s urban schools. Test scores are up at Gratz, which is once again being touted as a success story in the local media. Spencer is quick to remind us how isolated success stories often serve to obscure “just how difficult it is to ensure high achievement for all students, in every school in the land” (p. 244). As *In the Crossfire: Marcus Foster and the Troubled History of American School Reform* so clearly demonstrates, Marcus Foster’s life and legacy reveal the importance of moving beyond the blame game in addressing not only the problems in urban schools but also the deep social divisions that make those problems visible.

### References

- Foster, M. (2012). *In the crossfire: Marcus Foster and the troubled history of American school reform*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002).
- Race to the Top Act of 2013, H.R. 426, 113th Cong. (2013).

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