



Education: Assumptions versus History: Collected Papers (Hoover Institution Press Publication)

Thomas Sowell

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In the papers collected in Education: Assumptions versus History, Dr. Thomas Sowell takes a hard look at the state of education in our schools and universities. His imperative is to test the assumptions underlying contemporary educational policies and innovations against the historical and contemporary evidence.

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Mark Geise says

“Education: Assumptions Versus History” by Thomas Sowell consists of a collection of various writings by Sowell and a transcript of his 1977 congressional testimony. As a result, this is not a unified book where Sowell can relate the various chapters and trace them back to a general thesis. However, it is a good look into Sowell’s opinions about and approach to education over a couple decades. I believe that he is somebody whose opinions we need to value when debating education policy in this country.

Sowell generally believes that American education is deeply flawed. In a nutshell, he believes that our system has replaced what works with what sounds good. Education in the United States is especially prone to fads and “solutions” which are not borne out by any more evidence than that they simply sound plausible. He often targets universities because he has been in the university environment for the majority of his life, so he is most familiar with the issues on college campuses. I always enjoy his analysis of affirmative action; he eloquently describes the mismatching of minority students and institutions when robust affirmative action policies are in place. This mismatching sets up minority students to fail, and they often rebel against the academic standards that they cannot meet, pushing for programs and classes that do not have those same standards. Students that would be perfectly qualified for a good state school are instead sent to an Ivy League school where they do not come close to meeting usual admission standards. When these students eventually rebel against the academic standards that they cannot meet at institutions for which they are not suited, racial tensions are stoked and harmful stereotypes are reinforced. Sowell has many complaints about post-secondary education in the United States, but his arguments against affirmative action may be the most memorable.

Anything by Thomas Sowell is worth reading, as anyone who has read my other reviews would likely know is my opinion. Because he has spent so much of his life in academia, he knows what works and what does not. He understands incentives and how our system incentivizes so many harmful policies. His congressional testimony and book reviews contained at the end of the book are changes of pace, as they allow the reader to understand his thoughts in a slightly different setting, whether it is answering someone else’s questions or analyzing someone else’s works.

Karen Cowgill says

This is one of my favorite writers!! Very informative and VERY relevant today! So many people act as if poor people, of ALL races, can't learn... WRONG!!
