Beginning in 2009, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded a $575-million effort to hire and retain “effective” teachers at large, urban, public-school districts around the country. The initiative sought to “reward and retain effective teachers while dismissing ineffective ones,” writes Murphy research professor of education Susan Moore Johnson in her new book, Where Teachers Thrive: Organizing Schools for Success (Harvard Education Press). Yet despite its funding, the seven-year program failed to significantly improve student achievement or increase graduation rates.

The philosophy backing that intervention and reflected in organizations like Teach For America assumes that improving K-12 education is a matter of dropping good teachers into schools. But this ignores the larger school context in which teachers are working—and a lot of what it means to be a good teacher, Johnson argues, depends on how well schools are organized. And in her view, what she calls the “egg-crate” model of schools, in which teachers work alone and have few formal opportunities to learn about what their colleagues are doing, is pervasive in U.S. schools, with deleterious effects for students and educators alike.

Johnson’s work as an education researcher began in the 1970s, after nearly a decade of teaching English at Brookline (Massachusetts) High School in an environment she describes as ideal, where teams of teachers wrote curricula together and conferred about how their classes were going. When she started her doctorate, she assumed other former teachers had had similar experiences. They hadn’t. “That was the beginning of this inquiry,” she says. “That was a kernel of ‘Oh, this is very important and it’s largely ignored by researchers and the public.’ There was very little research and writing about the context of teachers’ work.”

At the turn of this century, Johnson says, economics research indicated that high-quality teachers (usually measured in terms of their students’ standardized test scores) are linked to better outcomes for their students, such as college attendance
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and higher earnings. “Rarely, if ever, has academic research had such an immediate and far-reaching impact on education policy,” she writes. After 2000, policymakers aimed to increase schools’ “human capital—the sum total of their teachers’ qualifications, skills, and professional habits.” That not only produced costly failed programs, but also militated against the kind of ground-level, context-dependent research Johnson conducted.

Where Teachers Thrive is organized around the most important themes that have emerged from that research. It draws in part from the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, her Graduate School of Education program, initiated in 1998, seeking to understand the experiences of teachers in high-poverty urban schools. Using classroom interviews with 257 teachers and principals from 14 elementary, middle, and high schools in Massachusetts, the book maps out Johnson’s findings on some of the most contested aspects of the teacher experience, such as evaluations, pay, and responses to student conduct. She is not prescriptive about the merits of different educational philosophies, showing instead how varied approaches, like so-called no-excuses schools or progressive ones, can be successful if they apply systems that allow them to realize their values and goals (see “Re-thinking the American High School,” May-June, page 11). Indeed, Johnson presents few categorical answers at all. Whether standardized tests are good or bad—or whether teacher evaluations are effective—depends, she holds, on how schools use them.

Part of what underlies her work, Johnson explains, is the demographic shift that took place among teachers at the turn of the century. After the liberalizing social movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, Johnson says, “schools could no longer count on women and African-American men to become teachers”—they had other career options. Now, teachers are drawn from a broader professional class who can move to other professions if teaching doesn’t work out. Turnover has increased tremendously. This new cohort of teachers “didn’t expect to get rich,” Johnson explains. “They hoped that they could afford teaching, but if they couldn’t do the work that mattered to them [in their schools], they could and would and did leave. No one before that had ever thought about the problem of turnover.”

Suddenly, principals had to worry about making their schools appealing places to work, so good teachers would want to stay:
making it possible for them to teach creatively, not just to the standardized tests; allowing them to assume leadership roles influencing their schools’ values and practices; and implementing thorough, good-faith evaluation systems that help teachers improve, rather than look for ways to punish them. In schools where evaluation systems worked well, Johnson writes, “teachers appreciated receiving detailed recommendations that were grounded in thorough observations...to be effective, evaluators must have a deep understanding of instruction and, ideally, be able to demonstrate the skills they recommend."

Johnson says people often imagine “a trade-off between teachers and whether they like their jobs,” on the one hand, and students, on the other. “The assumption...is that it’s zero sum: what the teachers gain the students lose. But the research is pretty clear that [when] teachers report their workplace is a positive support for them, students do better,” even controlling for demographic differences.

In her final chapter, “What Pay Means to Teachers,” Johnson addresses one of the most publicly visible debates about how the United States treats teachers. Those who are intrinsically motivated to teach, as she knows directly, aren’t trying to get rich. But neither should citizens imagine that high-quality education can be done on the cheap. Cost-cutting schemes “can save only so much before they begin to compromise students’ learning,” she writes. “Only when our society acknowledges and funds the costs of a first-class education system will our schools and teachers succeed in providing it.”

—MARINA N. BOLOTNIKOVA

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### What Ails Modern Liberalism?

A central tenet of modern liberal political philosophy is that individuals can be governed only by consent. But both the nature of this consent and the conditions under which it may be obtained have been debated for centuries. In his new book, The Theology of Liberalism (Harvard University Press), Beren professor of government Eric M. Nelson enters that debate, positing that liberalism took a “fateful wrong turn” in the 1970s. The problem, he argues, emerged because liberal thinkers forgot their metaphysical roots.

Liberal thought, Nelson writes, sprang from answers to a longstanding problem for Christianity: how can suffering and injustice exist in the world if God is both good and all-powerful? The orthodox position, which Saint Augustine championed, blames human sin. Humans cannot choose to be good, and

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### METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS

Religious faith, he says, can provide an answer. An anti-Pelagian, Rawls first denied the possibility of meriting salvation, and then maintained this denial of merit, even after abandoning religion.

Modern, Rawlsian liberals, unknowingly drawing from this theological debate, hold that a person’s actions are most often “arbitrary from a moral point of view” because they are contingent on circumstance. Humans do not choose their birth families or the traits they inherit, so how can they deserve any consequent benefits? A truly fair society, such thinkers claim, would eliminate all such unmerited differences. Only then could individuals be free to consent to liberal government.

The problem, Nelson argues, is that humans cannot claim to know what perfect equality would entail. “For what we are really asking,” he expanded in the interview, “is whether a world characterized by the existing distribution of natural endowments among human beings is, from the point of view of justice, the best of all possible worlds.” While most modern liberal philosophers would say no, Nelson writes that he sees no way to know for sure.

Religious faith, he says, can provide an answer: those Christians, for example, who believe their God is perfectly just, and the world