

Remembering David C. Berliner: Scholar, gadfly, mentor and defender of public education

By Paul Gediman, ASU News
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Two bored 18-year-olds walk into a bar.

That is, in fact, almost how the career trajectory of one of the most influential and admired education scholars in America began.

Not long after he turned 18, David Berliner and a friend bought a bar and grill in the Bronx. Although the venture lasted only a summer, it sparked Berliner's interest in psychology.

"I changed my major from business to psychology," Berliner once said in an interview, "because, when you sit at a bar and listen to people, you realize how crazy people are in this world. And so I decided to become a psychologist."

Becoming an educational psychologist set Berliner on a path that saw him become, first, a leading authority on expert teaching and, ultimately, a fierce advocate of public education and a champion of the role public education and educators play in nurturing and sustaining democracy.

After earning an undergraduate degree from UCLA in 1961, Berliner went on to earn a PhD in educational psychology from Stanford. In 1988, having established himself as a scholar, he arrived at ASU, where, from 1997–2001, he served as dean of the College of Education. He remained at ASU for the duration of his career. At the time of his death in September 2025, he was Regents Professor Emeritus.

Prolific and relevant

In the world of education scholarship, Berliner was notable for the fact that his work was discussed among scholars and among policymakers and practitioners, in both faculty lounges and at cocktail parties. He was known for both the complexity and clarity of his thinking, as well as for a communication style that, in another time, might have been described as having a common touch.

In a [series of video interviews](#) conducted and curated by Audrey Beardsley of ASU's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Berliner comes across as, by turns and simultaneously, straightforward and sophisticated, argumentative and generous, earnest and lighthearted. It was a style that made him cherished by many as both a professional collaborator and a lifelong friend.

As he moved through his career, Berliner published more than 200 articles, technical reports and book chapters. He was a member of the National Academy of Education and the International Academy of Education, as well as a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. He served as president of both the American Educational Research Association and the division of educational psychology of the American Psychological Association. Among the many organizations for which he served on boards are WestEd, The National Academy of Education and the National Academy of Science/National Research Council Board on Testing and Assessment.

A textbook coauthored with Berliner's Stanford mentor, Nate Gage, became the standard textbook of educational psychology. He was a prolific and influential scholar of what practices and habits of mind are required for "expert teaching."

Berliner's embrace of complexity won the trust of many educational practitioners. In a recent blog post in remembrance of Berliner, ASU Professor [Punya Mishra](#) recalls another faculty member, Danah Henriksen, telling him that Berliner's insight about the difficulty of educational research "always resonates with her EdD students as they navigate the tensions between theory and the rich complexity of actual practice."

It was precisely that challenge that Berliner and his wife, Ursula Casanova, addressed in their 1996 book "[Putting Research to Work in Your School](#)."

Public intellectual

With the 1995 publication of "[The Manufactured Crisis](#)" (coauthored with Bruce Biddle), Berliner stepped strongly into the role of public intellectual. The book was, in many ways, a response to "[A Nation at Risk](#)," the 1983 report commissioned by the Reagan administration that criticized the performance of public schools and called for far-reaching education reforms.

As the national conversation about the quality and purposes of education trended toward an emphasis on workforce preparation, Berliner held fast to a vision of public education as a precondition for sustainable democracy.

In his subsequent books, including "[Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools](#)" (with Sharon L. Nichols) and "[50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America's Public Schools](#)" (with Gene Glass, a friend and another ASU Regents Professor Emeritus who served as associate dean of education alongside Berliner at ASU), he took an iconoclastic, often combative view of what he regarded as the conventional wisdom animating the education reform movement.

His arguments, and the way he made them, influenced generations of scholars, including many at ASU.

Jeanne Powers, now a professor at the Mary Lou College for Teaching and Learning Innovation and a research collaborator of Berliner's, says, "I was lucky enough to see the last talk he gave at the Horace Mann League conference in February 2025. David's talk touched upon the issues that animated his recent work. We have lost a vital voice in the field, and I hope to honor his legacy by serving as a critical friend of public education with my own work."

Just before he died, according to his close friend and collaborator Gene Glass, Berliner told his daughter, BethAnn "that he wanted to live long enough to read a review of his book that was just published." Glass made sure that a review of the book, a collection of essays titled "Public Education for Our Nation's Democracy," was [published in Education Review](#).

Throughout his career, Berliner often acknowledged — but never apologized for — the fact that his tone was sometimes received as abrasive. "I'm a bit of a New Yorker, and getting in someone's face is fun," he said. "If someone says something untrue about public schools, I'm right there."

Generous mentor and friend

He was also "right there" for his doctoral students, colleagues and friends. As fierce and opinionated as Berliner was about the difference between good research and bad, and about the value of public education, he was a broad-minded teacher, colleague, mentor and friend.

Beardsley says that Berliner "was the most pragmatic and public-facing of scholars, never letting political ideologies and narratives outweigh research evidence. David was brilliant and fearless, yet also full of humor; he was quick with a good joke, delighted by delicious food, especially at certain New York delicatessens, he loved singing show tunes from some of his favorite Broadway musicals, and he was always up for a glass of great wine. He never failed to tell me how proud he was of me. But the truth is, I was prouder to be his mentee, always in hopes that I might carry forward even a fraction of his legacy."

In addition to those who conduct scholarship and research firmly in his intellectual and ideological lanes, Berliner's generosity extended to those who succeeded him in administrative positions. When asked, he served as a sounding board for Carole Basile, the current dean of ASU's Mary Lou Fulton College, and wrote a forward to "[The Next Education Workforce](#)," a book she coauthored with colleagues at MLFC.

Gustavo Fischman, now a professor at Mary Lou Fulton College and an internationally recognized scholar of educational policy and comparative education, recalls the impact that Berliner's thinking and character had on his own career and life:

"A long time ago, in 2000, he hired me, despite knowing that the committee had reservations ... He supported me when I was mourning and celebrated my minor achievements. He honestly gave and took critical comments on shared projects. He made me laugh and think with small and big stories. His friendship, wit and insight enriched so many moments of my life, not just as a researcher and educator, but also as a husband, son and friend."

In life, perhaps much more so than in print, Berliner was known to let others have the last word in a conversation. In one of the videos he filmed with Beardsley in 2009, he struck a valedictory tone that captured so much of his voice:

“I do expect to retire eventually. But that obligation to criticize and speak up doesn’t stop when I lose my tenured professorship. It just means that the university can distance itself from me, happily, and I can fulfill my obligations as a citizen in the same ways that I tried to fulfill them as an academic. You read, you write, you think, you argue, you drink wine and you eat well.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Renowned scholar David C. Berliner published more than 200 articles, technical reports and book chapters, and is remembered by his colleagues throughout the ASU community.