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The Big Idea -- it's bad education policy

One simple solution for our schools? A captivating promise, but a false one.

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By Diane Ravitch

March 14, 2010

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There have been two features that regularly mark the history of U.S. public schools. Over the last century, our education system has been regularly captivated by a Big Idea -- a savant or an organization that promised a simple solution to the problems of our schools. The second is that there are no simple solutions, no miracle cures to those problems.

Education is a slow, arduous process that requires the work of willing students, dedicated teachers and supportive families, as well as a coherent curriculum.

As an education historian, I have often warned against the seductive lure of grand ideas to reform education. Our national infatuation with education fads and reforms distracts us from the steady work that must be done.

Our era is no different. We now face a wave of education reforms based on the belief that school choice, test-driven accountability and the resulting competition will dramatically improve student achievement.

Once again, I find myself sounding the alarm that the latest vision of education reform is deeply flawed. But this time my warning carries a personal rebuke. For much of the last two decades, I was among those who jumped aboard the choice and accountability bandwagon. Choice and accountability, I believed, would offer a chance for poor children to escape failing schools. Testing and accountability, I thought, would cast sunshine on low-performing schools and lead to improvement. It all seemed to make sense, even if there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope.

Today there is empirical evidence, and it shows clearly that choice, competition and accountability as education reform levers are not working. But with confidence bordering on recklessness, the Obama administration is plunging ahead, pushing an aggressive program of school reform -- codified in its signature Race to the Top program -- that relies on the power of incentives and competition. This approach may well make schools worse, not better.

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Those who do not follow education closely may be tempted to think that, at long last, we're finally turning the corner. What could be wrong with promoting charter schools to compete with public schools? Why shouldn't we demand accountability from educators and use test scores to reward our best teachers and identify those who should find another job?

Like the grand plans of previous eras, they sound sensible but will leave education no better off. Charter schools are no panacea. The nation now has about 5,000 of them, and they vary in quality. Some are excellent, some terrible; most are in between. Most studies have found that charters, on average, are no better than public schools.

On the federal tests, known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, from 2003 to 2009, charters have never outperformed public schools. Nor have black and Latino students in charter schools performed better than their counterparts in public schools.

This is surprising, because charter schools have many advantages over public schools. Most charters choose their students by lottery. Those who sign up to win seats tend to be the most motivated students and families in the poorest communities. Charters are also free to "counsel out" students who are unable or unwilling to meet expectations. A study of KIPP charters in the San Francisco area found that 60% of those students who started the fifth grade were gone before the end of eighth grade. Most of those who left were low performers.

Studies of charters in Boston, New York City and Washington have found that charters, as compared to public schools, have smaller percentages of the students who are generally hardest to educate -- those with disabilities and English-language learners. Because the public schools must educate everyone, they end up with disproportionate numbers of the students the charters don't want.

So we're left with the knowledge that a dramatic expansion in the number of privately managed schools is not likely to raise student achievement. Meanwhile, public schools will become schools of last resort for the unmotivated, the hardest to teach and those who didn't win a seat in a charter school. If our goal is to destroy public education in America, this is precisely the right path.

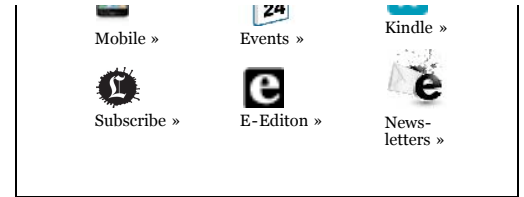
Nor is there evidence that student achievement will improve if teachers are evaluated by their students' test scores. Some economists say that when students have four or five "great" teachers in a row, the achievement gap between racial groups disappears. The difficulty with this theory is that we do not have adequate measures of teacher excellence.

Of course, it would be wonderful if all teachers were excellent, but many factors affect student scores other than their teacher, including students' motivation, the schools' curriculum, family support, poverty and distractions on testing day, such as the weather or even a dog barking in the school's parking lot.

The Obama education reform plan is an aggressive version of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind, under which many schools have narrowed their curriculum to the tested subjects of reading and math. This poor substitute for a well-rounded education, which includes subjects such as the arts, history, geography, civics, science and foreign language, hits low-income children the hardest, since they are the most likely to attend the kind of "failing school" that drills kids relentlessly on the basics. Emphasis on test scores already compels teachers to focus on test preparation. Holding teachers personally and exclusively accountable for test scores -- a key feature of Race to the Top -- will make this situation even worse. Test scores will determine salary, tenure, bonuses and sanctions, as teachers and schools compete with each other, survival-of-the-fittest style.

Frustrated by a chronic lack of progress, business leaders and politicians expect that a stern dose of this sort of competition and incentives will improve education, but they are wrong. No other nation is taking such harsh lessons from the corporate sector and applying them to their schools. No nation with successful schools ignores everything but basic skills and testing. Schools work best when teachers collaborate to help their students and strive together for common goals, not when they compete for higher scores and bonuses.

Having embraced the Republican agenda of choice, competition and accountability, the Obama administration is promoting the privatization of large segments of American education and



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undermining the profession of teaching. This toxic combination is the latest Big Idea in education reform. Like so many of its predecessors, it is not likely to improve education.

Diane Ravitch, a historian of education, is the author of "The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education."

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Although I agree with several of Ms. Ravitch's sentiments, I think she misunderstands the purpose of the competition. I also think the government's idea of how to incentivise excellence in teachers is astronomically off the mark. Standardized test scores are not a marker of achievement and do NOT indicate how well they are doing. As Ms. Ravitch said, there are so many factors affecting an individual's performance, especially during one test. The idea of competition is a good one if the marker of excellence was based on an in depth evaluation of the teacher's curriculum, lesson plans, teaching style, accommodations, etc. conducted consistently throughout the year. Some teachers have more challenging classes with issues such as poverty, abuse, neglect, learning disabilities, etc. It is how the teacher instructs these students that shows excellence. Incentivise actual performance in the classroom not national test scores, and there might be some difference. Reward a teacher for doing well on something and then share those ideas with colleagues. Team work and collaboration do matter. I also think a major problem is how teachers are prepared and the educations they get to become teachers. The programs are abysmal as I can say from experience; my four years were wasted. The change needs to start in how we train and prepare future teachers as there are currently minimal expectations.

engywook21 (03/22/2010, 8:49 AM)

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I agree completely with the post from Ransomee (03/15/2010, 2:14 PM), but I also think that a shift in paradigm can create opportunity for many small changes that have a cumulative effect. For example, if students are not willing, don't waste money trying to force them. Let them come back when they are ready. This simple idea is easy to implement. It may not work in all situations, but it is a step forward that makes sense. Combine it with other ideas that make sense and you create a tidal wave of education reform.

bluesherpa (03/17/2010, 10:10 AM)

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Historians look backwards, leaders move forward. Ms. Ravitch do us all a favor, "Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way."

JustFacts (03/16/2010, 7:52 PM)

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