
Running a Race Against Ourselves

Inefficient, ineffective education policy reforms rule the day

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The past decade has seen tremendous changes in America's public education system, with the past 12 months among the most active in our country's history. Indeed, in each state legislature this past winter and spring, education reform was as hot of a topic as we have seen in years. The media circus in Wisconsin was the most visible example, but education issues are at the heart of heated political controversy in several states. Within our state, Indiana policymakers enacted a wave of reforms that are arguably the most comprehensive and aggressive in the nation, ranging from how teachers are evaluated to how school boards are organized to how schools are graded.

This heat surrounding K-12 education is often appropriate, given that the most significant economic investment in many state budgets is devoted to K-12 public education. During the current and recently concluded sessions, the most contentious topics include collective bargaining restrictions for teachers, charter school expansion, and creation of private school vouchers, among other controversial reforms.

As would be expected, many of these reforms have been touted as the silver bullets that will result in major improvements in American education. However, the dirty little secret

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Volumes of nonpartisan research over the past 20 years suggest that most reforms (e.g., vouchers, charters, merit pay) have marginal effects on student achievement. Reforms that show benefits usually produce effects that are so small they call into question the enormous resource and opportunity costs of the interventions. Put simply, most education reforms are not effective, and those that show even a sliver of potential are very inefficient.

A close look at international test data, including the last round of scores from the Program for International Student

Assessment, or PISA, helps us understand why we aren't making progress: The United States unquestionably has one of the very best and very worst performing school systems.

That's not a typo. For example, the U.S. average on PISA in reading was 500, a rather mediocre showing that ranks us about 15th (similar to Iceland and several other European countries). But Asian-Americans scored a world-class 541 (second only to Shanghai, on par with South Korea and Finland), and Caucasians averaged an impressive 525 (on par with Singapore and Canada in the middle of the top 10). Not too shabby!

Hispanic Americans, however, scored a well-below-average 466 (similar to Lithuania and Turkey, ranked 40th and 41st, respectively), and African-Americans averaged 441 (similar to 45th-ranked Serbia and just ahead of 46th-place Bulgaria). Breaking out the scores by poverty level would tell a similar story: American "haves" are among the best-achieving students in the world, but the "have nots" perform at shockingly low levels.



These results suggest we have two very different educational worlds, each of which is a legitimate target for education reform. Hence the problem: Most policymakers act as though all aspects of our education system are failing, and they continually propose reforms that will fix "the problem" for all of our schools, and yet these reforms never stand a chance because their aim is too broad.

These interventions include charter schools, private school vouchers, alternative teacher certification, elimination of collective bargaining for teachers, and heightened accountability via huge increases in testing. These reforms may work some of the time for some students (the research is mixed), but this scattershot approach to reform is the metaphorical equivalent of trying to pound a square peg into a round hole—and a triangular one, too. Considering that the "square peg" costs literally hundreds of billions of dollars, it is surprising that leaders in the political, educational, and business worlds have not more frequently wondered, "Isn't there a better way?"

We believe there is. First, any reform generically aimed at fixing America's broken schools is a nonstarter. Over a dozen international assessments in the past two decades (the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS; the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, or PIRLS; and PISA) provide convincing evidence that America's schools work very well for some students and very poorly for others. Any sweeping reforms that don't acknowledge this reality should be taken with a big grain of salt.

Indiana’s recent reforms are a good case in point. Although some of the reforms are aimed broadly, others—such as the pending changes to the state accountability system—reward improvements for a wide range of students, including both low and high achievers. This type of reform stands a much better chance of improving student performance across the board than one-size-fits-all initiatives such as testing reforms.

Second, reforms should focus like a laser on one of the groups mentioned earlier: the low-achieving students who receive a substandard education, or the high-achieving students who are generally ignored and left to compete on their own with the best students in other nations—countries that invest heavily in improving educational opportunities for their brightest minds.

Third, and most importantly, we need to put ideology aside and adapt realistic goals for reform strategies. In our hyperpartisan age, calls for common-sense improvements to charter schools or voucher programs or collective bargaining, for example, get drowned out by howls of protest from advocates—who maintain that such interventions are the magic elixir for America’s education shortcomings and can’t be improved—and critics who shout that the reforms sound the death knell for our schools.

A prime example is the rhetoric surrounding charter schools. Dozens of studies provide evidence that some charter schools are working well, and some are not. The state-level differences between charters and traditional public schools are usually quite

small. Yet well-meaning suggestions to improve charters are attacked by advocates as attempts to kill charters (often accompanied by bizarre pronouncements that charter schools are doing fantastically well) and attacked by critics as attempts to kill traditional public schools (marked by equally bizarre assertions that most charters are failing). All of this rhetoric prevents honest appraisals of charter progress and analysis of aspects of charter schools that are and are not working. So we continually miss opportunities to improve charter schools and learn anything that could also be helpful to traditional public schools.

These manufactured debates result in expensive reforms that work for few students. Indeed, we worry that the all-consuming passion for ideological, one-size-fits-all solutions to our “broken” schools is putting us in a position where the United States simply will not be competitive.

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Indeed, we know of few other countries that are choosing such an odd path to global competitiveness. For example, China, whose largest city, Shanghai, took high scores in the last round of PISA, has placed a heavy emphasis on creativity and problem-solving, with significant efforts to ensure its best and brightest students perform at internationally competitive levels. South Korea followed a similar path as it emerged from the Asian currency crisis over a decade ago. Finland, an international leader in education, allows teachers a great deal of autonomy to focus on creativity and problem-solving in their classrooms. None of these countries abandoned issues of equity in its schools; rather, they all recognized that schools can focus on both equity and excellence.

We believe in American exceptionalism as much as the next red-blooded patriots, but if we look around and see that we're the only country running in a certain direction, we should be forgiven for asking if we are running the same race.



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