

Politics Cannot Produce the K-12 System We Need: Part I

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The K-12 system's results are appalling, but not surprising. The longstanding core policies assume that the government should control what children learn, that incentives don't matter, and that children have identical learning styles and interests, or that such differences won't affect how much they learn. We know the last two are utterly false – incentives matter and student engagement affects learning – and government control of content is risky with some historical examples of terrible abuse. Academic gains have been poor because a diverse student population needs what politics has never produced; relentless, customized renewal. We need a constantly improving menu of school choices that differ as much as our children.

Decades of experience demonstrates that changing the K-12 system's central commands or the people empowered to implement them, changes very little. Political control of schooling policies invariably yields unsatisfactory results because of: 1.) Unintended Consequences; 2.) The Lawmaking Process; 3.) Resistance to Change; 4.) Debilitating Uniformity; and 5.) Information and Incentive Deficiencies.

Part 1 discusses the unintended consequences. Mandates like a district curriculum and teacher qualifications aim to prevent shoddy schooling. But those ostensible protections have had the opposite long-run effect. Schools become compliance-driven, rather than performance-driven. Highly prescriptive policies erode teacher professionalism and morale, they discourage parental involvement, they stifle innovation, and they stifle attempts to customize subject content and pedagogy according to students' diverse learning styles and interests.

The current system addresses student diversity with huge shopping mall, comprehensive schools that alienate many students, create negative peer pressures, severely complicate management, and confuse parental oversight. Uneven quality is hard to police, and the complexity of a huge school masks fraud. The mega-school, something-for-everyone atmosphere complicates parental oversight so that students can more easily opt out of challenging courses.

That schools are too large is one of the few widely agreed-upon problems of the current system. But to seem fair while meeting diverse demands, public school officials keep building them.

Replacing political accountability with market accountability would produce a system of small, competing, specialized schools of choice. That would simplify management, and empower teachers as specialized autonomous professionals. School choice would engage students in the learning process by matching the strengths of each school's staff to the students most likely to benefit from them.