

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

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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 (*May 22 Newsletter*); 2.) The Lawmaking Process; 3.) Resistance to Change; 4.) Debilitating Uniformity; and 5.) Information and Incentive Deficiencies. The lawmaking process is the subject of this piece.

There is intense disagreement over just how to deliver on the public education promise of a high level of opportunity for every child, and what it means in terms of curriculum, textbook, and course content. The political process means the formation of a policy acceptable to a majority coalition. The majority coalition then imposes that compromise solution on everyone. Such a partial consensus approach, by its very nature, gives almost no one the services they would purchase for themselves, and forces many families to accept schooling they strongly object to.

Though leadership can and should move public opinion, the lawmaking process must satisfy public opinion. An opinion poll will never reveal demand for something that doesn't exist yet. As Henry Ford said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." It takes the lure of profit, and the fear of losing business to innovative new firms to drive the experimentation and innovation to foster the relentless product and productivity improvements we see in most of our economy, but not K-12 education. Fortunately, Henry Ford did not have to build a majority coalition to launch the automobile industry. Who would have sided with him over the employees and owners of all the industries related to horses and buggies? Fortunately, initial, high price sales to wealthy, early adopters are enough to drive innovation and launch countless transformation processes.

As the education reform debates of many countries continue to demonstrate, the political process exhausts all potential means of developing 'faster horses' before alternatives to horses get serious consideration. Hope triumphs over experience long after 'common sense' approaches have already failed repeatedly. For example, higher teacher salaries, smaller class sizes, and general increases in K-12 spending have repeatedly failed to deliver significant improvements in learning. It's not that such approaches can't work. It's just that inherent limitations of the political process have kept them from yielding the results 'common sense' says we should expect. That record of repeated, costly futility to make 'common sense' remedies work is a key indictment of political control.

We need genuine leadership to recognize the inherent limitations of the political process. To break this costly cycle of frustration, limit the government role to referee, information provider, and unbiased subsidizer, which means that a child's tuition subsidy does not depend on who owns the school the parents choose.