

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

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Decades of experience demonstrates that changing the K-12 system's central commands or the people that implement them doesn't yield much improvement. In fact, additional rules generally make things even worse. Political control of schooling policies yields disappointing results because of: 1.) Unintended Consequences (May 22 *Newsletter*); 2.) The Lawmaking Process (July 3); 3.) Resistance to Change (July 24); 4.) Debilitating Uniformity; and 5.) Information and Incentive Deficiencies. Debilitating Uniformity is the subject of this installment.

Children differ greatly in how they learn, but the political process yields one-size-fits-all policies. They are an inherent result of an appearance of fairness imperative, difficulty centrally planning product diversity, and compromise within the majority coalitions. Schools are quite similar. Even with perfect implementation, relative uniformity assures generally poor academic outcomes. Uniformity also explains why family traits account for the lion's share of academic achievement differences. Politically-determined uniformity is also the reason for socially corrosive lawsuits from groups with strongly held minority viewpoints, and divisive political competition over which policy to impose on everyone.

Use of attendance areas policy creates uniformity. It would seem unfair to offer services in some neighborhoods, but not others, and doing so would also force some children into unacceptable mismatches between their needs and their assigned school's practices. Assigning children to schools based on attendance areas precludes specialization in the strengths of each school's staff, and through choice, matching those strengths to the learning styles and interests of the children that would choose each school. Attendance zones force each school to offer something for everyone, a practice that is in total denial of what we know about the relationship between specialization and productivity. It also causes children and educators to get lost in the shuffle of cafeteria-style mega-schools – the appearance of fairness imperative answer to student diversity - trying to offer something for everyone under one roof.

But the political process tends towards uniformity without attendance areas. Because a majority coalition must approve the policies of all schools, a high degree of uniformity exists even when public school choice might otherwise facilitate schools with specialized missions.

The nature of education makes choice among specialized schools especially important. Educators and children are co-producers. The child-client is not a passive service recipient. The effectiveness of instructional services depends on the active engagement of a child; someone with an especially short attention span and lacking the maturity to see the long-term value of uninteresting material. Children differ. So do educators. A good match between a child's topical interests and learning style, and the

specialized mission of a school and the strengths of its professional staff maximizes the engagement of the child in the 'production' process.