

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

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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, which are the subject of this installment.

The political process is a woefully inadequate source of user-friendly information, and proper, strong incentives. Clear communication between citizens and public officials is scant and strained, especially below the level of the well-publicized, overriding issues. For issues that do not rise to the level of major vote flippers, legislators and administrators can ignore public opinion, even in the rare instances that it is well defined. Government control stifles the competition and market price signals of cost, benefit, success, and failure. The price control inherent in pre-paid universal free public schooling has a 4000 year history of sometimes devastating failure. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of market-determined prices, something all prosperous and growing economies have had in common; no exceptions.

Furthermore, the current system lacks the prioritization that results from market-determined prices, and lacks incentives to fully utilize the findings that are published. The K-12 system curbs virtually every way to reward genuine extraordinary performance, or penalize lackluster performance. Consequently, education research is not only generally of low quality, of limited relevance to classroom practice, and the useful findings are widely ignored.

One of the best examples of political impotence is the struggle to create some appropriate incentives through merit pay schemes. Merit is difficult to measure without competition and market prices. Private sector merit generates the additional revenue to reward it. Public sector merit does not increase tax revenues. Therefore, public sector merit pay is a zero sum game, which creates some perverse incentives like reluctance to help teacher colleagues. Since public sector funding is not a function of merit, agencies frequently argue that merit is a function of funding; poor performance warrants increased funding. That is an inherent defect of political control; difficulty measuring and weak plus perverse incentives. Again, this is a problem we can only eliminate if we introduce market accountability so that merit is necessary to be choiceworthy and yield funding. Resources should flee poor performance, but in the public sector they often do the opposite.