

EDUCATION WEEK

Voucher Programs, Private Schools, and State Tests

Rick Hess Jan 20, 2014

Last week, there was something of a kerfuffle over the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's proposal to impose new regulations on voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs. Fordham called for requiring all participating students to take state assessments; mandating public disclosure of those results, school by school, except for schools that enroll fewer than ten total students in tested grades; and requiring schools that enroll a substantial number of students to have their eligibility determined by how their students perform on state tests.

Fordham vice president Mike Petrilli explained, "Bad schools happen. They happen in the public sector, the charter sector, and, yes, the private sector. And... the answer cannot be 'let the market figure it out.' Because it hasn't, and it won't--and somebody must."

The proposal drew strong objections from an array of voucher proponents. University of Arkansas professor Jay Greene argued, "Testing requirements hurt choice because test results fail to capture most of the benefits produced by choice schools... a series of rigorous studies have found large long-term benefits for students able to attend schools of choice even when short-term test results show little or no benefit... Choice schools cause students to graduate high school and go to college... [and] to more competitive universities at much higher rates. And choice causes those students to enjoy much higher salaries later in life."

The Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson and Jason Bedrick wrote, "By forcing every school to administer the same tests, states would... stifle diversity and innovation. ... The Common Core-aligned tests create a powerful incentive for schools to teach the same concepts in the same order at the same time. This would make it all but impossible for schools to experiment with new ways of tailoring education to meet the needs of individual children" without getting crushed on the aligned assessments.

I've four thoughts on all this:

First, Fordham's stance requires a lot of hair-splitting. After all, this is the same Fordham that has decried the regulatory overreach of No Child Left Behind, critiqued state accountability systems, and fretted about the problems with traditional school system governance. It's theoretically possible to make those claims and still turn around and argue that voucher programs need much more test-based accountability and state regulation, but it does presuppose that policymakers

have a Goldilocks-like ability to find the "just right" solution. Color me skeptical.

Second, I share Greene's key concern about the problems with relying too narrowly on reading and math scores to judge school quality. However, and it's a big "however," I don't blame Fordham or choice skeptics for having problems with Greene's argument. After all, many choice advocates have long slammed districts and promoted school choice by pointing to reading and math scores. I've got a lot of sympathy for those who feel like Greene's position constitutes something of a bait-and-switch, with choice advocates are changing the rules when it suits them.

A similar point arises with regard to another Greene criticism. In the column quoted above, he observed, "The only piece of evidence that Fordham presents to support the claim that state testing requirements improve performance at choice schools is the finding that scores rose when Milwaukee private choice schools were required to take the high stakes state test. But as Pat Wolf, one of the authors of that study, noted -- the score increase may well be just an artifact of private choice schools deciding to start prepping students for that high-stakes test now that they were required to take it. In other words, Fordham is confusing real learning increases with test manipulation." Now, it's a terrific point, but it again can feel like choice advocates are changing the rules. After all, the same point can be made about the research suggesting that district schools in Florida had higher test scores when at risk of losing students to vouchers under the state's accountability system. Yet, in that case, choice advocates don't see evidence of possible "manipulation," but of choice's ability to make schools improve.

Third, the Fordham report is smart and polished enough, but feels surprisingly naïve about the realities of the legislative process and regulatory creep. The folks at Fordham are smart and savvy enough to know that regulation has a way of expanding. I don't see anything in their proposal that reassures on that score. Once there's a precedent that voucher students in private schools should be subjected to state assessments, what's to stop a well-intentioned, enterprising legislator from suggesting those schools really ought to have certified teachers, a state-approved curriculum, state-approved facilities, a state-approved plan of emergency services, or whatnot? Absent compelling limits, it's all too easy to imagine legislators or state education officials imposing such seemingly sensible, innocuous measures. The result would be an open invitation to bureaucratization.

Fourth, if you care, where do I come down on this? I accept the principle that Fordham is espousing: that when schools take public funds to educate students, it's reasonable to ask that they be more transparent about performance--and perhaps to base eligibility on certain agreed-upon performance outcomes. But I'm real concerned about relying too heavily on reading and math scores, especially given the presence of the Common Core. And I'm hugely concerned about opening the door to increasing levels of regulation and state interference in school operations. Fordham's report didn't give me any reassurance on either count. In the end, while I'm with Fordham in principle, for the moment, that leaves me closer to Greene, Coulson, Bedrick, et al.