

Choosing to Learn

Increasing compliance to the state reduces accountability to parents.

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Americans face a choice between two paths that will guide education in this nation for generations: self-government and central planning. Which we choose will depend in large measure on how well we understand accountability.

To some, accountability means government-imposed standards and testing, like the Common Core State Standards, which advocates believe will ensure that every child receives at least a minimally acceptable education. Although well-intentioned, their faith is misplaced and their prescription is inimical to the most promising development in American education: parental choice.

True accountability comes not from top-down regulations but from parents financially empowered to exit schools that fail to meet their child's needs. Parental choice, coupled with freedom for educators, creates the incentives and opportunities that spur quality. The compelled conformity fostered by centralized standards and tests stifles the very diversity that gives consumer choice its value.

Most low- and middle-income families today have no viable alternative to their zoned public school. Absent any alternatives, the school is not directly accountable to them, so policymakers try to approximate real accountability through one-size-fits-all regulations.

But distant bureaucrats cannot know the individual needs and preferences of every family. Nor do they share the local knowledge enjoyed by educators. Nevertheless, some policymakers and education experts have come to view top-down regulations as synonymous with "accountability" rather than as a pale imitation. They therefore mistakenly view parent-driven choice programs as "unaccountable," confusing regulation with accountability.

In recent days, some have even argued that states should impose the Common Core tests on all school-choice programs. Yet there is no compelling body of evidence that top-down regulation improves student outcomes in schools that are already directly accountable to parents. By contrast, there is much evidence that direct accountability to parents yields results superior to those that are defined by bureaucratic red tape.

A global review of the scientific research comparing different types of education systems reveals that the most market-like, least regulated systems consistently outperform more centralized and

regulated ones — by a ratio of 15 statistically significant findings to one, across seven different measures of educational outcomes.

In the United States alone, eleven of twelve randomized-controlled trials — the gold standard of social-science research — have found that school-choice programs improve student outcomes, from academic achievement to graduation rates and college matriculation. School-choice students outperform their public peers even though public schools, which are already heavily regulated, generally spend more than twice as much per pupil.

Moreover, as the education marketplace grows, all students benefit. In 22 of 23 empirical studies, academic performance of public-school students improved in response to increased competition. The only study to show no statistically significant difference was the voucher program in Washington, D.C., where public schools were intentionally shielded from competition. The gains from competition in the other studies tended to be modest, but so were the sizes of the choice programs. As in other sectors, greater competition will bring greater gains.

As educational choice expands, parents and schools will adapt. They already do. Many independent schools voluntarily measure their students' performance with one of numerous nationally norm-referenced tests and publish the results to attract parents. Meanwhile, most parents talk with one another, visit schools, and otherwise do their homework before selecting a school — and even the least active choosers benefit from the decisions of their more active and informed peers.

Educational choice has also been repeatedly shown to produce far higher levels of parental satisfaction than does centrally planned schooling. That's because choice empowers parents to find the best education for their children, and test scores are not their only consideration. Research shows that many parents care more about safety and discipline, graduation and college acceptance rates, and moral values.

Dictating uniform standards and tests threatens those other valued features by redirecting educators' focus from serving families to catering to bureaucrats. It also contributes to a culture of "teaching to the test" that has already resulted in several large-scale public-school cheating scandals.

Children are not interchangeable widgets that can be beneficially fed through their education on the same conveyor belt. Even within a single family, children often learn different subjects at different speeds. Myriad new options are arising in response to that reality that allow students to learn at their own pace in every subject, helping all to fulfill their individual potential — the very antithesis of uniform government mandates.

Instead of imposing ineffective bureaucratic "accountability" on schools, our education system should ensure choice to all students so that every school is held truly and directly accountable to families. Policymakers then can dispense with rigid testing mandates, and all schools, public and private, will be free to serve their most important clients: families.