



Are School Choice Technocrats Needed?

By Jason Bedrick

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In a recent blog post, Andy Smarick of the Fordham Institute declares: “School Choice Technocrats Wanted.” Smarick argues “if civil society and families are to make more decisions and the government is to make fewer,” then “reform-oriented technocrats” will have to play a greater role.

For a century, we relied on the district system to deliver urban public education. There was a single government provider, it controlled all aspects of its schools, and students’ school assignments were based on home addresses. Countless policies and practices (related to facilities, transportation, accountability, and much more) evolved with that particular system in mind.

But as that system is slowly replaced by one marked by an array of nongovernmental school providers, parental choice, and the “portfolio management” mindset, new policies (undergirded by a new understanding of the government’s role in public schooling) are needed. That requires new government activity, much like the transition from a state-controlled to a private enterprise economy requires new rules related to property rights, lending, contracts, and currency.

Smarick is surely right that the transition from the monopolistic system of geographically assigned district schools to a market in education will require “new policies” and “a new understanding of the government’s role” in education. However, Smarick is murky on who will be making those policies or what exactly government’s role should be. As University of Arkansas Professor Jay P. Greene recently cautioned, education reformers must avoid “pursuing reforms that are likely to re-create the same dysfunctional system they oppose.” Unfortunately, though, some are succumbing to the technocratic temptation:

When they observe a problem their inclination is to fix it by prohibiting or regulating it. If parents might pick bad schools in a choice system, the solution is to impose regulations that prevent schools from being bad and prohibit those that are nevertheless bad from participating. The regulations impose paperwork burdens on schools. And so that officials can judge school quality, some reformers favor requiring participating private schools to take the state test based on the state curriculum.

If regulating schools to success were the solution, our public school system would be wonderful. They have no shortage of regulations and prohibitions, all designed by well-meaning people to

make those schools perform well. So, why do some reformers believe it will turn out differently with heavily regulated choice systems? Well, because they'll be in charge and they are smarter. They'll design the regulations more appropriately. They'll implement them more judiciously. They'll only impose the regulations we really need. [...]

If we impose public-system-like regulations on choice programs we will end up with choice programs that look a lot like the public system, including their dysfunction. As Orwell warned us, "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."

Smarick himself appears to recognize this danger. After outlining several areas where he believes government should play a role—supporting “high-performing” charter schools, addressing transportation needs, disseminating information, and “creating bodies to hold schools accountable; clarify school eligibility rules; develop central application, placement, and enrollment systems; and ensure the highest-need students are served”—Smarick notes: “If the above is done poorly, it could lead to the replacement of one inflexible, ineffective bureaucracy by another.” Indeed.

Given the government’s track record thus far, why should we have any confidence that these policies will be implemented well? Smarick doesn’t say.

Smarick concludes by arguing that we need more reform-minded technocrats to fight technocracy:

But in a terrific chapter in the new *Room to Grow*, “A Conservative Governing Vision,” Yuval Levin makes a “reform conservatism” argument that’s highly applicable here. “Conservatives today need to pay more attention to the means by which our vision of government should be advanced—more attention, that is, to the details of public policy.” That requires developing “some technical policy expertise precisely to combat” the technocratic bent of existing arrangements.

In other words: school choice technocrats wanted.

I don’t see how Smarick can draw that conclusion from Levin’s anti-technocratic treatise. Levin argued that “some technical policy expertise” was required “to advance an anti-technocratic, genuinely constitutionalist vision of American government.” Levin is not proposing that conservative reformers should become technocrats themselves, or that they should fight leftwing technocracy only to replace it with rightwing technocracy—i.e. rule by “experts.” Rather, Levin proposes expanding the “space between the individual and the state” that our constitutional system was designed to protect, and “restraining government from invading or collapsing that space.” To do that, advocates of liberty work harder to understand how the existing technocratic system invades that space, and how to peel it back. Essentially, Levin is making the same case that Friedrich Hayek made in *Constitutional of Liberty*, which Levin cites:

“Liberty in practice depends on very prosaic matters, and those anxious to preserve it must prove their devotion by their attention to the mundane concerns of public life and by the efforts they are prepared to give to the understanding of issues that the idealist is often inclined to treat as common, if not sordid.”

But perhaps I’m reading too much into Smarick’s use of the term “technocrat.” Perhaps Smarick only means that education reformers should pay attention to the details of public policy in order to expand educational freedom. If so, great. But if he means the of right-of-center technocratic tinkering that has crippled school choice programs in Louisiana and Wisconsin, then school choice advocates should be very wary.

In other words: school choice technocrats not wanted.

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