

Fordham Continues to Advocate Playing with Fire

By Jason Bedrick

June 25, 2014

Imagine the following playground scenario:

Tommy: Hey guys, I have a great idea! Let's all go play with fire! It'll be fun!

Cate: No way, Tommy. Playing with fire is very dangerous. Someone could get hurt!

Jay: Cate's right. I used to think playing with fire was a good idea, but I've seen other kids get burned.

Milt: Yeah, plus, there are lots of ways to have fun without playing with fire!

Tommy: Friends, you've taught me an important lesson about the dangers of fire. Okay, here's my new idea: let's all go play with fire, but if other kids don't want to, then playing video games is totally cool too. How's that sound?

If you find Tommy's response puzzling, then you're likely to find the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's "revised" approach to educational choice and accountability equally puzzling.

In the debate between parental choice and top-down government mandates, the Fordham Institute follows Yogi Berra's advice: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it!" Fordham supports choice, but argues that the only way to prevent parents from choosing "bad" schools is to regulate them out of existence. In January, Fordham released a "toolkit" for policymakers that advocated requiring all private schools to administer the state test (i.e. – Common Core) and publish the results as a condition of accepting school vouchers or even tax-credit scholarships. Lower-performing schools would be forbidden from accepting students with vouchers or scholarships going forward.

Fordham's proposal elicited a torrent of criticism. Andrew Coulson, Director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, and I argued that their approach would stifle educational diversity and innovation. Jay Greene noted that standardized tests capture only a fraction of the benefits of educational choice. James Shuls of the Show-Me Institute pointed to the evidence that parents hold a range of legitimate views regarding what constitutes quality. Robert Enlow, President of the Friedman Foundation, reminded Fordham that such top-down accountability has not worked in government schools—something that Fordham itself once lamented when it called certain test-based accountability measures an "illusion." Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute expressed concern that without any clear limiting principle, mandating state tests could easily lead to mandating "certified teachers, a state-approved curriculum, state-approved facilities, a state-approved plan of emergency services," etc.

Last week, Fordham's incoming Executive President, Michael Petrilli, offered what he called an "olive branch" to Fordham's critics:

While we didn't agree with the all of the arguments forwarded by our friends, we did come to see the risk to private-school autonomy and innovation that a test-based accountability system could create. We also understood the particular sensitivity around using Common Core tests for this purpose.

Petrilli then explained that Fordham has updated its “toolkit” accordingly. But if you expected that recognizing “the risk to private-school autonomy and innovation” would mean abandoning the push to mandate state assessments (i.e. – Common Core tests), then Fordham’s “revised” approach will leave you scratching your head. In the “revised” toolkit, Fordham recommends that state policymakers:

Require that all students who receive a voucher (or tax-credit scholarship) participate in state assessments. (While we prefer state assessments as policy, we think any widely respected test that allows for ready comparison against other schools or districts is a reasonable compromise);

In case you missed it, Fordham’s “revision” is in the parentheses. Like little Tommy, Fordham claims to recognize the risk of playing with Common Core fire but continues advocating for exactly that (unless they need to compromise for political purposes, in which case other tests are ~~totally cool~~ “a reasonable compromise”). If Fordham truly recognizes the “risk to private-school autonomy and innovation” that Common Core poses, then why is it still calling mandatory Common Core testing as an initial preference?

Petrilli concluded by calling for “a round of Kumbaya” and then getting “back to work on expanding great educational options to lots more children nationwide.” However, expanding educational options should mean more than just which school best teaches to the Common Core tests. By all means let’s work on expanding educational options... but let’s do it right.

Jason Bedrick is a former member of the New Hampshire state legislature. He was a Republican representing Windham, New Hampshire. He is currently a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.