



Bedrick: Education excellence can't be achieved from above

By Jason Bedrick
June 9, 2014

Education in America in the 21st century is moving away from the standardization of the Industrial Era and toward greater customization. As parents increasingly tailor their children's education through course choice, scholarship tax credits, education savings accounts, homeschooling, online and blending learning, and so on, top-down accountability schemes will become increasingly untenable. As our education system becomes more decentralized and complex, the locus of accountability should shift from government to parents.

The best form of accountability is directly to parents who are empowered to choose the education providers that meet their children's needs—and leave those that do not. Since low-income families often cannot afford anything besides their assigned district school, the government school system has had to impose top-down accountability measures to ensure quality in the absence of choice.

However, such centralized accountability measures are ill suited to handle complexity and tend to stifle diversity and innovation. As University of Arkansas Professor Jay P. Greene noted recently:

“With top-down reforms the people selecting the standards, designing the tests, setting the cut-scores, devising consequences for performance, writing the curriculum, and picking the instructional methods have to get it just right ... for many different kinds of kids who may need different approaches. And they have to be right over and over again as circumstances and information change.”

That's a nearly impossible task even before special interests attempt to block, dilute, or co-opt such measures. Moreover, a parent seeking to change the system is, at best, merely one out of tens of thousands of voters at the local level or one out of tens of millions at the state level. With the advent of Common Core's national standards, a parent's ability to affect systemic change is practically nil.

By contrast, educational choice programs foster innovation and diversity by putting parents in charge. They give space to providers to develop new ways of educating diverse children that might not fit the pre-existing mold. Parents can then evaluate which approaches work best for their children and which do not. Over time, this market process weeds out ineffective approaches and encourages the proliferation of more effective approaches.

Some advocate combining the two forms of accountability, attempting to harness the dynamism of market-based education reforms while tethering it to a single standardized test that allows for apples-to-apples comparisons. This may sound tempting in theory, but in practice the imposed uniformity undermines the very diversity and innovation that educational choice provides.

Testing drives what is taught, when it is taught, and how it is taught. That drives away education providers, thereby reducing the choices available to families, while creating a powerful incentive for participating providers to conform.

Quality information is crucial, but as a study by the Friedman Foundation revealed, parents want more than scores. Parents seek out schools that are safe, provide individual attention, instill discipline, and cultivate a sense of community. They also desire a wide variety of information about potential education providers and they are willing to take multiple steps to acquire it. Parents want to know about college acceptance rates, curriculum and course descriptions, school accreditation, the student-teacher ratio, and more. Barely 10 percent of families in the study listed standardized test scores among their top five reasons why they chose a particular school.

There is no reason to expect that all students who happened to be born in the same year should proceed at the same pace in every subject. Moreover, there is no single best way to educate a child or to measure educational progress. However, a lack of government-imposed standards does not imply a lack of any standards at all. Rather, it would create space for competing standards.

As the market for education expands, demand for services that rate or certify education providers will increase. While it would be presumptuous to claim to know exactly how the market would develop to meet this demand, it is likely that both formal and informal methods of gathering and disseminating information will emerge.

Formal methods rely on experts to provide consumers with analysis, rankings, or even private certification. Examples in other fields include *Consumer Reports*, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, or Underwriters Laboratories. Education providers will have an incentive to grant access and information to such raters and certifiers in order to demonstrate their quality, thereby conferring a competitive advantage.

As ratings are subject to the biases of the raters, informal methods of determining quality that rely on the experience of users offer a complementary approach. This can take the form of conversations with friends and family or testimonials on web-based platforms similar to Amazon.com or Yelp.com.

Scholarship organizations like Step Up for Students are particularly well-positioned to help guide parents to the information they desire. They already have personal relationships with both scholarship families and private schools. Some scholarship organizations may take a more formal approach, perhaps even restricting scholarships to schools they certify. Others might take a more informal approach, providing a forum for parents to share their experiences with one another. Additionally, donors are free to support the scholarship organizations which adopt the accountability strategy they believe is most effective.

A decade from now, our education system is likely to be more customized and complex. Truly empowering parents to choose what's best for their children will require phasing out archaic,

top-down accountability measures that crowd out both private education providers and private accountability systems. The educational excellence that we all seek cannot be engineered from above. Rather, we must give it the space to grow organically out of the innumerable choices of individual families among myriad education providers.

Freedom might be messy, but it works.

Jason Bedrick is a policy analyst for Cato's Center for Educational Freedom.