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School choice means accountability to parents

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We all want an education system that delivers a high-quality education to all children. Ensuring quality requires holding schools accountable for results, but that raises a crucial question: accountable to whom?

A few years ago, as the Arizona Legislature was considering expanding its pioneering education savings account (ESA) program, the mother of a child with special needs who benefited from an ESA listened in disbelief as critics described the program as “unaccountable.”

With an ESA, parents can customize their child’s education. Instead of enrolling their child at his or her assigned school, they can use a portion of the funds allocated for their child to pay for private school tuition, tutoring, textbooks, educational therapy, online courses and more. However, because ESA parents are not subject to the same top-down regulations as district schools, opponents frequently claim that they “lack accountability.”

When it was finally her turn to speak, the mother corrected the critics: “The accountability is with me,” she explained, “I am responsible for my child. I am responsible for my child’s education. The accountability lies with me.”

As Texas is now considering similar ESA legislation, similar misconceptions abound. For far too long, we have confused government regulations for accountability — but they are not the same.

The best form of accountability is when schools or other education providers are directly answerable to parents. ESAs empower parents to choose the learning environment that works best for their child, so if a school isn’t meeting its child’s learning needs, they can go elsewhere.

However, most low- and middle-income families have no viable alternative to their assigned district school. Because these schools are not directly accountable to parents, school boards and bureaucrats at the state capital attempt to approximate real accountability through top-down regulations, similar to public utilities and other monopolies that aren’t directly accountable to consumers.

Yet decades of attempts to regulate district schools into quality have had little effect. Government-imposed “accountability” regulations like No Child Left Behind and the Common Core have failed to significantly improve quality, let alone spur innovation.

Unfortunately, too many policymakers continue to labor under the false notion that such mandates are synonymous with “accountability” rather than an inferior alternative to direct accountability to parents. It’s time for a new direction.

Texas should adopt an ESA policy that will hold all schools directly accountable to parents. Giving parents 90 percent of the state’s approximately \$9,000 maintenance and operations funding per pupil would put the average Texas private school’s tuition — approximately \$8,500 — within reach.

The state would still set certain health and safety standards and ensure that ESA funds are spent only on qualifying educational products and services, but the accountability for results would lie with the people who are in the best position to evaluate those results: parents. Once district schools know that dissatisfied parents can use their ESAs to take their children and their money elsewhere, there will be no further need for the layers upon layers of centralized mandates.

Of course, parents need information to help them make good decisions about their child’s education. Fortunately, a system of choice also creates incentives for third parties to help parents acquire that information. In the K-12 sector, websites like GreatSchools.org and Niche.com already provide expert ratings based on available data and give parents and students a platform to review their schools based on their personal experience. As K-12 educational options expand, we should expect to see even more expert reviewers and platforms for user reviews to fill the growing parental demand for information.

There is no perfect system, but educational choice policies build on strengths and correct errors far more effectively than regulatory fiat. In a choice-based system, high-quality education providers that attract families have a strong incentive to expand while less-effective providers must either go out of business or imitate their more successful competitors.

For this process to work, educators must have the freedom to innovate and parents the freedom to choose the providers that work best for their children. By enacting an ESA policy, Texas can lead the way toward a system that delivers a high-quality education for all children.

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