

## **The Two Tracks of School Reform**

**Standards-based testing and school choice go together.**

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April 1, 2014

For two decades now, education reformers have promoted a two-track strategy for improving our schools. The first track is standards-based: Set clear, high expectations in core academic subjects; test students regularly to see which schools and students are clearing the bar; and hold schools (and perhaps also educators and pupils) to account for the results.

The second reform track is school choice: Allow parents to select among a wide array of education providers, encouraging innovation along the way.

We have argued for years that these two tracks are interdependent — even codependent. Let us explain:

Standards-based reform got underway in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in part as a reaction to *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report by President Reagan's Commission on Excellence in Education. This reform track offered what Lamar Alexander called a "horse trade": more autonomy for schools in return for stronger academic results. Previous waves of reform had focused on inputs, intentions, and regulation: Boost the credentials and pay of teachers; increase course requirements for high-school graduation; mandate lower class sizes; etc. When that yielded paltry success, policymakers flipped the equation: less regulation but more focus on outcomes.

That works, however, only when the desired outcomes are clear. That's the role of academic standards, which, if well crafted, provide guidance to teachers, parents, textbook writers, and test designers about what students are expected to know and be able to do, year by year, in a few core subjects. States labored for decades to put such standards in place, prodded in 1994 by the federal Goals 2000 Act, then in 2002 by the No Child Left Behind Act, with its insistence on annual testing and consequential accountability.

Standards-based reform has many pluses. For one, it works: Test scores for America's lowest-performing students, including many low-income and minority children, rose significantly, at least in the early grades, after the advent of the standards, testing, and accountability movement. Such children are now one to two grade levels ahead of where their mid-1990s counterparts were. That's real progress. Done well, as in Massachusetts, standards-based testing encourages strong teaching in the classroom, and gives parents and taxpayers reliable information about school performance. It also can touch every school in America in ways that few other reforms ever could.

But standards-based reform has an Achilles' heel: Its bark is worse than its bite. For all the talk of "accountability," nothing much actually happens to "failing" schools or the people who work in them. The school-turnaround track record is dismal because, frankly, nobody is sure what to do with awful schools. Most of the evidence indicates that they are impervious to improvement. Yet policymakers are loath to shut them down; the kids need to go somewhere.

Enter school choice. The early 1990s gave birth to both charter schools (first in Minnesota) and vouchers (first in Milwaukee). The proposition — originally formulated by Milton Friedman — was (and remains) that parents, particularly the poor and those with children stuck in those failing schools, deserve better options and that a vibrant marketplace would lead to educational improvement. At least in the charter sector, the idea was also to create new schools from scratch, to be designed with Lamar Alexander's horse trade in mind: They would have far greater autonomy than traditional district schools but would also face serious accountability. If they didn't meet the terms of their charters, they would close.

Like standards-based reform, school choice has racked up some serious successes and has proven to be a highly effective way to educate children. Virtually every rigorous study of charter schools or private schools participating in voucher programs finds that they outperform traditional public schools; the track records on high-school graduation and college-going are particularly impressive.

But school choice also has a weak point: bad schools that emerge and persist in a marketplace that hasn't brought nearly as much quality control as proponents expected. While the choice sector *as a whole* looks pretty good on test scores and other measures, the averages mask poor performance from a significant minority of choice and charter schools. For whatever reason — and it really is something of a mystery — some parents will choose and stick with schools that are no good by any measure of actual performance.

That's why we (and many other choice supporters) have urged a degree of standards-based reform for the choice sector, too. We believe that low-quality charter schools, if they cannot be swiftly set right, should be shuttered, as was the original intent. And we believe that private schools receiving taxpayer dollars to educate needy kids should test their voucher students and report the (aggregated) results. Those that fail to show progress over time should be disqualified from continuing to receive public funds. This approach is good for kids — protecting them from bad schools — and it's also good politics — safeguarding choice programs from criticisms about weak performance and shoddy quality.

Needless to say, not all choice-minded reformers share our enthusiasm for "choice plus accountability for results." Some would rely on market forces alone. The libertarian Cato Institute is currently circulating a petition calling on reformers and policymakers to "dispense with rigid testing mandates" because "the compelled conformity fostered by centralized standards and tests stifles the very diversity that gives consumer choice its value."

One factor that's raising the temperature of this debate is contention about the Common Core. These English and math standards have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, and represent (in our view) a rigorous, coherent set of expectations pegged to college and career

readiness in those two important subjects. But they are under attack — from some conservatives, because President Obama has taken undue credit for their adoption, and from some liberals, because, well, because liberals hate standards and testing (and many educators don't love accountability, particularly when applied to themselves).

In a recent policy paper, we argued that private schools participating in voucher programs should have to administer their state's tests to their scholarship students. After all, a common test does make life easier for parents "shopping" for schools across the public, private, and charter sectors and for taxpayers seeking evidence of return on investment from their education dollars. But now that most states are transitioning to the Common Core, the state test will soon be some sort of Common Core test. And that has freaked out some choice supporters, some private-school teachers, and some charter-school teachers, too.

Without backing away from our commitment to the inseparability of the two tracks of education reform, we see room for compromise on specifics. Yes, some degree of transparency and accountability is essential for all choice schools. We don't buy the argument that we should leave it to "parental choice alone"; experience in the real world demonstrates (here as in every other market that we know of) that some external quality control is needed if only to protect consumers. But in the case of private-school accountability, it doesn't have to be the Common Core-aligned tests that states will be using for their district and charter schools (some of which also need "alternative" accountability arrangements). If states will allow schools in the choice sector to use other valid, respected assessments — the kind that make clear to policymakers, parents, and taxpayers whether a school and its pupils are making academic progress from year to year — we won't complain. It's not ideal but it's better than nothing. We certainly never meant to force private schools (and specialized charter schools) to forfeit the curricular distinctiveness that is a major reason for choosing them in the first place.

It has taken many years to reach this point, but the school-reform train finally has momentum. Let's keep the forward motion — and avoid getting stuck in a tunnel. America's kids are at a station down the line, waiting for help to arrive.