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Framing education as a business

By Valerie Strauss

The public education system is a civic institution, the most important in the United States, but that sort of thinking isn't popular today among school reformers.

Buzzwords in education have for some time been "innovation," "effectiveness," "value-added," etc., but expect them to be overtaken by "return on investment" and, of course, the tried but true "bloated bureaucracy."

If you have any doubt that business thinking has taken over the education policy debate, take a look at these invitations from two nonprofit organizations in Washington D.C., the [CATO Institute](#) and the [Center for American Progress](#).

CATO is a libertarian think tank and CAP is a powerful Democratic public policy research and advocacy organization led by John Podesta, who was chief of staff to President Clinton.

From the Center for American Progress:

Return on Educational Investment A District-by-District Evaluation of U.S. Educational Productivity

January 19, 2011, 10:30am – 12:30pm

Opening address:

John Podesta, President and Chief Executive Officer, Center for American Progress

Presentation of study, methodology, and interactive website:

Ulrich Boser, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

Panel discussion:

Jacob Adams, Professor of Education, Claremont Graduate University

Eugene Chasin, Senior Vice President, Say Yes to Education

Jim Shelton, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education

Moderated by:

Cynthia G. Brown, Vice President for Education Policy, Center for American Progress

This report is the culmination of a year-long effort to study the efficiency of the nation's

public education system and includes the first-ever attempt to evaluate the productivity of almost every major school district in the country. In the business world, the notion of productivity describes the benefit received in exchange for effort or money expended. Our project examines the academic achievement a school district produces relative to its educational spending, while controlling for factors outside a district's control, such as cost of living and students in poverty.

Our aim for this project is to kick start a national conversation about educational productivity and encourage states and districts to embrace approaches that make it easier to improve achievement and sustain educational efficiencies. Join us for a conversation about this groundbreaking report. We will talk with the researchers who created the report as well as with other experts in the area of school productivity.

Space is extremely limited. RSVP required.
Seating is on a first-come, first-served basis and not guaranteed.

From CATO:

Cloning "Superman": What Other Countries Already Know about Scaling Up Good Schools

Friday, January 28, 2011
Noon

featuring

Peje Emilsson
Founder, Kunskapsskolan, Sweden

Humberto Santos
Researcher, Instituto de Políticas Públicas, Universidad Diego Portales, Chile

and

Sarah Sparks
Journalist, Education Week

moderated by
Andrew Coulson
Director, Center for Educational Freedom, Cato Institute

Everyone agrees that we have too few good schools and too many lousy ones. What's missing is a mechanism for replicating what works. Competitive for-profit markets have served that function in other fields, from cell phones to coffee shops. Can the same thing work in education?

To find out, we've invited experts from both hemispheres to tell us what their nations have learned from decades of experience with private-school choice. Peje Emilsson founded the largest chain of for-profit private schools operating in Sweden's nationwide voucher program. Humberto Santos has studied the academic performance of public schools, independent private schools, and chains of private schools in Chile's voucher program. Responding to their findings and asking challenging questions will be Education Week journalist Sarah Sparks.

Please join us for a lively discussion of how we might finally be able to stop "Waiting for Superman."