

Small: Private schools, public benefit

Jonathan Small

February 8, 2018

Americans instinctively dislike monopolies, even rail against Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Tobacco, Big Whatever.

These have a modicum of competition. There is one monopoly, however, that government not only allows, it controls. I'm talking, of course, about Big Learning.

The public school monopoly is entrenched in American culture, founded on the premise that everyone is entitled to good schooling regardless of means.

But monopolies, whether industrial or educational, tend to crush innovation and incubate inefficiency.

Corey D. DeAngelis, an education policy analyst for the Cato Institute, offers an apt analogy. Suppose America had public restaurants assigned to citizens according to where they live. Since taxes support these establishments, whether or not we eat there, they have little incentive to offer high-quality meals. Many consumers would have every incentive to avoid private restaurants with better food because of the cost. Diners who wanted better food would weigh the costs and decide if the quality was worth the sacrifice. Public restaurants wouldn't close, but they would have to improve.

"Traditional public schools ... hold exorbitant monopoly power through government-mandated assignment based on neighborhood," DeAngelis writes in a recent policy brief. Incentivizing choice through vouchers, for example, would motivate more diners to eschew the Big Learning monopoly.

It might also give the education monopoly the incentive to improve its product. DeAngelis examined test scores in 52 countries and found that a mere 1-percentage-point increase in the private market share of primary schooling would lead to moderate increases in student math, reading, and science achievement.

His conclusion is that this "robust scientific evidence" of improved outcomes "further indicates that decision makers ought to increase access to private school choice around the world. In particular, Education Savings Accounts, tuition tax credits, individual tax credit deductions, and voucher programs could increase access to private schooling and other private education services within countries."

In Oklahoma City Public Schools and in Tulsa Public Schools, astonishingly, in all the tested grades, at least 75 percent and 71 percent of respective students are not proficient in English and at least 81 percent and 77 percent of respective students are not proficient in math. Abysmal results have been the norm for decades – regardless of funding levels.

Oklahoma's menu for education should include a variety of choices. This would not harm public schools but will help the most vulnerable.