

One Size Fits Few

Education markets are far better than central planning at delivering educational services.

By Andrew Coulson

A chief argument for the creation of our modern state-level school systems was that the centralization of decision-making in the hands of experts would usher in a new era of more effective teaching methods and materials, and thus lead to significant improvement in student achievement.

Is our support for centralizing curriculum and testing justified? Or is it another example of something that seems as if it ought to work but really doesn't? Let's look at how well the move to state-level curricula and testing has played out.

One of the most decisive examples was California's adoption of a new statewide reading instruction curriculum in 1987. Over the next several years, reading scores declined steadily. Seven years into the new reading program, California's grade 4 reading scores had fallen to dead last in the nation.

What had gone wrong? As it happened, the education experts on the state curriculum committee had selected a program that eliminated structured, synthetic phonics. Evidence showing the great importance of phonics in early reading instruction was already well established before the committee members made their decision. So why did the committee's experts reject all the instructional programs that adhered to the consensus of reading research?

It turns out that structured, teacher-directed methods of instruction run counter to the philosophy that has held sway in teacher training programs for more than 70 years. So when it came time for a group of educators to choose a method of reading instruction for California's millions of children, they eschewed structured, empirically-proven phonics lessons, opting instead for the unproven but philosophically appealing 'whole language' approach.

To blame California's rejection of effective reading instruction meth

ods on this committee would be a terrible mistake. These were well-meaning individuals doing what they thought, and what they had been taught, was right. There is no reason to think that an entirely different group of people would not have made the same choice, in spite of the evidence in favour of phonics.

The problem was not with the people involved, but with the system in which they operated. If there had been a mechanism in place that would have encouraged committee members to heed the most reliable research and that would have strongly tied their own professional futures to student outcomes, then and only then could this committee, and the next, and the next, be expected to consistently make sound decisions.

The case of California is not unique. It is just one episode in a long history of arbitrary curriculum and textbook selection decisions made by well-meaning expert educators. Occasionally their decisions have been good ones; more often they have been dubious or even disastrous.

The record of state testing programs is equally troubled. A great body of evidence has been amassed over the past decade pointing to widespread corruption in these programs. High-stakes test results are referred to in the scholarly literature as 'polluted' by fraud and are considered to be virtually useless as measures of actual student achievement.

The problem ranges from occasional outright cheating by teachers and principals to inflate student scores to the more common practices of 'teaching to the test' and of preventing potentially low-scoring students from taking the tests.

Most of us agree on the importance of a thorough, well-designed curriculum. And the public is solidly in favour of academic testing as one way to find out how much children are learning. But the benefits to be derived

from mandatory imposition of a particular curriculum or set of tests by state and federal governments are not supported by the evidence.

Past reforms point to the need for a systematic, reliable, lasting mechanism for promoting educational excellence. The question is: Where to look for such a mechanism? We can ask how people in other nations educate their children, but most industrialized nations have systems very similar to our own.

What we can do is look at history. Schooling is not a new invention. Its lineage can be traced back 2500 years, and this awesome wealth of experience has many lessons to teach us. Rather than present an overly compressed list of historical precedents, I urge interested parties to read my book *Market Education*.

The bottom line is that education markets are the only systems that have consistently performed well under widely varying social settings

. The essential elements of an education market are:

- Choice for parents;
- Direct financial responsibility for parents;
- Freedom for educators;
- Competition among schools; and
- The profit motive for schools.

Taken together, these five factors create the incentive that is missing from the current system. They promote the development of effective educational methods, and also the dissemination and perpetuation of those methods.

They constitute, in other words, exactly the sort of mechanism we are looking for to address our educational problems.

(Adapted with permission from "With Clear Eyes, Sincere Hearts and Open Minds", www.mackinac.org. Mr. Coulson, an expatriate Canadian, is senior fellow in education policy at Michigan's Mackinac Center for Public Policy.)