

How to Judge the Success of K-12 Education Policy

By Arthur H. Camins

As my morning train passed through the tunnel, a faster-moving train on a parallel track grabbed my attention as it passed on my left, going in the same direction. For a few moments, I experienced the discomfiting feeling that I had spontaneously reversed direction, moving away from, rather than toward, my final station. Reason told me that I was still headed to my destination, but I turned to my right and peered through the darkness at the stationary tunnel wall just to check. My sense of forward motion returned. Physicists explain this phenomenon as **relative motion**. Speed and direction are measured in relation to a reference point. Contrary to the adage, perception isn't always everything.

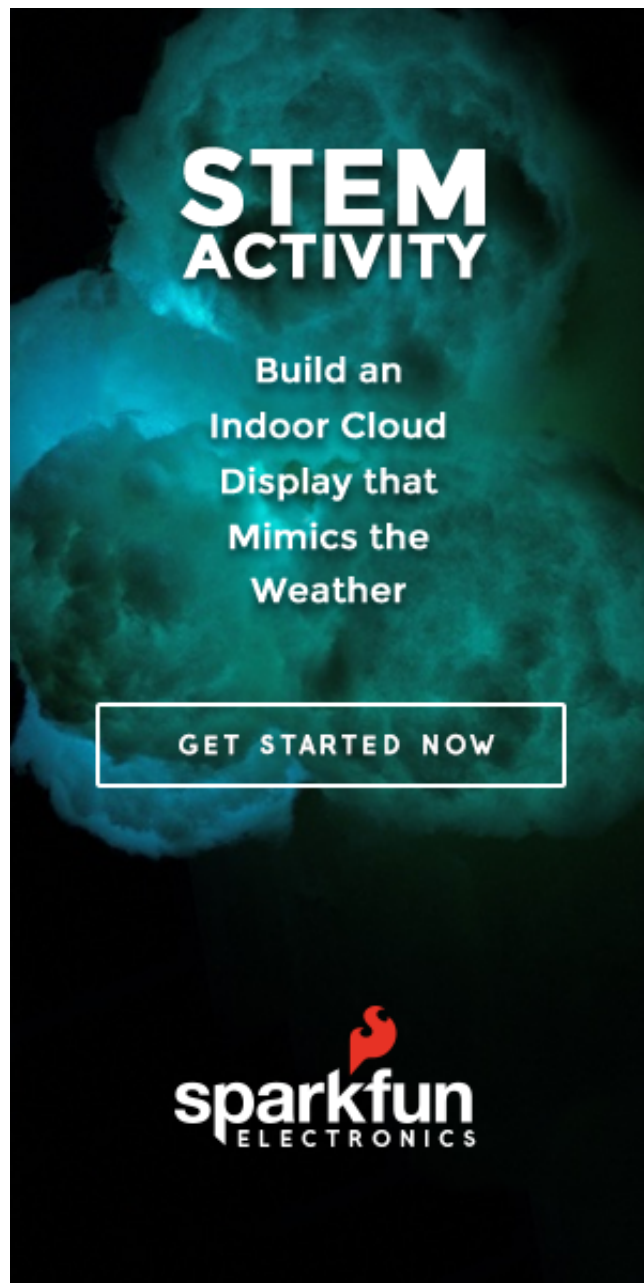
Stick with me. This is a metaphor for education policy and social justice.

In education, it is vital to remember frames of reference. We need to know about both faster- and slower-moving trains. We need to be clear about what we left behind, where we want to go, and with whom. We need to be cognizant of who is traveling on which track and not forget to take into account the complex education transport system.

An external observer of my morning train, or any passenger grounded in reality, would have known that relative to the departure point, both trains moved continuously forward.

So it is with education—with one big difference. External critics often ignore the fact that some trains have more powerful engines, ride on tracks with less friction, hold a larger supply of fuel, and carry different passengers. However, unlike physicists, policymakers often forget to consider frames of reference. They ignore a fundamental principle of science. Scientists use models to investigate and explain the natural world, but understand that models have limits. Designers of current education improvement, on the other hand, tend to focus blame on teachers and principals while ignoring other significant parts of the system. It is like blaming the drivers, conductors, and passengers for the speed and arrival time of the slower train.

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Many current education policymakers try to explain complex phenomena such as disparity in education outcomes with reference to only some parts of the system, such as teachers' or students' persistence. They ignore other contributing factors, such as unemployment, family and neighborhood stability, differential access to health care, and inequitable school funding. When they look exclusively at narrowly defined scores on standardized tests, everything seems like backward motion. When some critics of American education look at seemingly faster-moving school systems such as those in Finland or Ontario, they only notice speed and ignore how the systems are built and supported.



—Getty

As is the case with prejudice-driven stereotypes, even some people inside school systems become so accustomed to looking at who is moving faster that they forget to recognize their own significant progress.

Children, classrooms, and schools all have an education destination. Some students get a head start because their parents have more time and financial resources. Some students get to ride on faster trains because they live in communities that can commit more resources to local schools. And notwithstanding the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, students' race remains a substantial determinant of which train children can get aboard. Different tracks are not just a metaphor for school resource variations. Teaching students on different tracks, also known as ability grouping, is still common within many schools.

Education in the United States is unequal by design. It is structured to perpetuate inequality and segregation. Some students continue to leave school better educated than others. This is not the de facto result of parental selection of schools or neighborhoods. Differential funding of schools through inequitable property taxes is a choice. Housing segregation is the result of deliberate policy decisions and zoning regulations. In-school tracking and differential instructional decisions are intentional choices, too. These longtime fixtures of our society appear to be givens, but that does not imply that they are not purposeful political choices. This makes them harder, but not impossible, to change.

"In education, it is vital to remember frames of reference."

However, let's not forget to consider frames of reference. If we occasionally turn away from the faster-moving train of inequality, there are sure signs of progress toward equity.

The first two promising developments are growing support for what was once considered unrealistic—passage of laws in an increasing number of cities setting a minimum wage of \$15 an hour, and the burgeoning movement to opt out of high-stakes testing. The former means more money in workers' paychecks, which in turn leads to families that are less stressed and more stable and to more children who are ready to learn. The latter, if its growing influence is realized in different policy decisions, will mean more time for meaningful learning. Both suggest a shift in the perception of what is possible when average citizens get together to demand change. That's progress relative to where we have been.

A third sign of progress is the developing body of knowledge about effective teaching and

learning, which has yet to be fully realized in daily instruction. For example, because we know that learning is an active process, the old practice of passive learning and rote memorization should fade away. Because we know that early development affects children's later learning, we should be investing in family health and well-being. Because we know that students' emotional health affects learning, we should invest in family and community stability and promote supportive classroom culture. Because we know that learning in diverse environments is good for all children, we should be promoting integrated classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods.

A battle is raging between two solutions to different education tracks. One is to give a few students an opportunity to jump aboard a theoretically faster-moving train with limited available space. That track symbolizes charter schools. However, on average, they are no more effective than the regular public schools from which they drain limited funds, and they are removed from the democratic control of communities.

The other solution is systemic, addressing not just the content and quality of instruction and school leadership, but also inequity in funding and the conditions of people's lives in communities through investment in jobs, universal preschool, health care, and access to higher education.

My perception of my morning train ride was constrained by the reference points in the tunnel. So it is if we confine our thinking to accepting the limits of the current education system and the inequity that surrounds us. Our new reference point for education should be ensuring what it takes to prepare every child **to be successful in life, work, and citizenship**.

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