

COMMENTARY

Too Many Carrots, Too Many Sticks**Four Fallacies in Federal Policies for Low-Achieving Schools**

By Arthur H. Camins

Under the leadership of U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan, the federal Department of Education has achieved a remarkably high level of policy consistency. From its application guidelines for Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, Teacher Incentive Fund, and Title I School Improvement grants, to the proposed blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the department has chosen to address the challenge of improving persistently low-achieving schools by means of externally imposed competition, rewards for success, and prescriptive dictates to correct insufficient progress.

Unfortunately, these strategies constitute superficial and short-term approaches to complex and enduring problems. Gaps in student performance associated with race and socioeconomic status have persisted for decades precisely because they do not respond to simple solutions. Therefore, we should cease funding “get smart quick” proposals. Instead, we need to invest in cultivating the capacity of educators in each school. To do so, we need to develop the content-specific pedagogical knowledge of our teachers and principals. We need to help them create school-based learning communities that build common commitment to continuous long-term improvement and provide time for professional collaboration and growth, drawing upon the best expertise and latest research. We need to rethink and restructure teacher preparation and teacher induction. We need to comprehensively support students’ social and emotional needs and the provision of health services. That would be money well spent.

Regrettably, the Education Department’s spirit of urgency to address seemingly intractable problems is undermined by the fallacious reasoning behind its current policies. The issue is not that the department’s leaders in any way oppose the principles behind these more complex solutions. It is that they do not recognize that their unswerving reliance on carrot-and-stick responses actually undermines more nuanced approaches. There are four fundamental fallacies in the Education Department’s policies as they are now being applied to low-achieving schools.

- *Extrapolation to Scale.* Effective principals and superintendents intentionally hire the best teachers they can find and systematically remove the least capable. From a school or even a district perspective, the pool of highly skilled teacher applicants is theoretically unlimited. But at the state and national levels, the number of extraordinarily qualified teachers is finite. As federal policy, a simplistic focus on replacing half the teachers in low-achieving schools falls apart under the weight of the erroneous assumption that there is a very large pool of untapped classroom-level talent that has somehow been ignored or overlooked by school districts across the nation.

When it comes to restaffing classrooms, extrapolation from individual schools to national policy fails the test of validity. A far more productive approach would entail a massive national investment in—and the reimagining of—teacher-preparation programs in order to increase the quality and efficacy of the total candidate pool.

- *Redistribution of Effective Teachers.* Race to the Top regulations demand equitable distribution of effective teachers. School districts that value equity avoid the self-fulfilling-prophecy practice of automatically placing the least experienced teachers in the neediest schools. At scale, however, it is naive to imagine that a sufficient number of effective teachers can be either forced or coaxed into transferring from successful to persistently low-achieving schools.

First, it is reasonable to assume that the more successful schools, at least as measured by test scores, tend to be in more-affluent areas with more political clout; they would likely resist the wholesale transfer of their most effective teachers. Second, teachers who are successful in working with students who face minimal learning challenges will not necessarily achieve the same level of success with students who are struggling to overcome many challenges. Third, it is unlikely that the most effective teachers will in large numbers want to work in schools where their jobs would always be on the line with the next release of annual test scores. Finally, a national steal-teachers-from-effective-schools strategy is bound to pit teachers, schools, and school leaders against one another rather than unite them in common purpose.

- *Improvement by Reward and Threat.* The potential loss of stable employment figures prominently in the Education Department’s turnaround models. This feature decreases rather than increases the ability of low-achieving schools to attract and retain the best teachers. If I ask myself, “When and under what circumstances have I gotten better at something,” several answers echo in my head: when I cared deeply about an outcome beyond my own personal needs; when I derived a sense of satisfaction from challenging myself; when other people with whom I had a shared purpose supported and worked *with* me to get better together. I also know that I have gotten better when it has been comfortable to admit what I do not know.

My own answers reflect what teachers tell us. It is strong, supportive leadership and collegial relationships that keep teachers in schools and inspire them to do their best—not rewards or threats. The current federal approach insults educators by assuming that they are unable to learn and improve, unmotivated by larger social purpose, and therefore more in need of external control to change their behavior. A

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better approach would be to create for others the conditions under which each of us have learned to do our best. This strategy requires investment in the time and skills needed to convert schools into professional learning organizations.

- *Overemphasis on Results.* Sometimes, the shortest distance is not the best route to our desired destination. The pressure in federal regulations to include summative student results as a "significant" component in teacher evaluation and compensation decisions presents just such a case. Most of us know that when we are anxious about an outcome, we tend to take shortcuts that lead to careless or unintended errors. Abundant research suggests that, with the exception of avoiding imminent danger, fear and anxiety are not productive responses, because they suppress high-level brain functioning. The task of differentiating instruction to promote in-depth learning across ever-changing variations in student needs and abilities requires just such high-level thinking.

The recent subprime-mortgage and banking scandals offer a powerful example of the long-term damage that can result from focusing on a single outcome. The pressure on low-performing schools to make "adequate yearly progress" has already contributed to a narrowing of the curriculum and superficial teaching to the test. Adding loss of employment for individual teachers and principals would only increase this disturbing trend. We should be evaluating teachers and principals based on how and to what extent they use data from formative and interim assessments to address gaps in student learning, rather than singularly focusing on summative outcomes.

Carrots and sticks may achieve short-term results, but their use frequently has unintended consequences to the detriment of core values and long-term goals. It is long past time that we stop endorsing policies and programs based on fallacies, and instead demonstrate the leadership and integrity to act on what we know makes all of us better.

Arthur H. Camins is the executive director of the Gheens Institute for Innovation in Education of the Jefferson County Public Schools, in Louisville, Ky.

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