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When Test Scores Become a Commodity

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The recent spate of cheating scandals in cities like Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington presents an interesting conundrum. Those opposed to education reform schemes tied to the evaluation of student test scores and teacher compensation, or "value added" evaluation, claim that the teachers and administrators who were caught cheating were the victims, compelled to cheat out of fear for their livelihoods. On the other hand, value-added advocates solemnly pronounce that there is no excuse for cheating and that, moreover, cheating teachers and administrators provide the very evidence that reform is necessary. Both positions are valid. Can we work our way out?

The best way to resolve a conundrum, short of dramatically cutting the knot, Alexander-style (which requires chutzpah and a certain genius), is to clarify what the knot is, how it is tied, and then figure out how to undo it. And the reason this particular problem is so knotty—to overuse the metaphor—is that value-added reform systems create one of the most unpredictable and complex artifacts of human societies: a market.

Value-added evaluations both directly and indirectly monetize student performance, and because money is a basic commodity, the process then turns student scores into a commodity. Of course, that performance is not monetized for the students; it is monetized for the teachers and administrators. By making student scores the basis for evaluation, the students and their scores create a market for the teachers and administrators whose livelihoods depend upon the results. And in systems, such as the District of Columbia's, where scores are not only the basis for teacher retention but also for direct incentives tied to bonus schemes, the market can be even more difficult and complex.

Within a market economy, commodities can be unpredictable and volatile. Investing in commodities, for most people, is tantamount to just plain gambling. In fact, the average commodity investor would have a better chance at blackjack or craps than in the commodity market. Simply put, commodity markets encourage cheating. And when cheating occurs, it occurs because market players view the risk of getting caught worth the reward of greater wealth. And even if direct cheating doesn't take place, these markets reward questionable practices that, while not technically cheating, are close to the edge.

A good example of this would be the commodity markets that don't actually reward excellence in production. In some cases, as farms overproduce and prices drop, the government must step in to stabilize the free-fall, often through schemes that pay farmers not to grow crops. By essentially monetizing student test scores, we do the same thing to education. We are rewarding teachers for

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turning out kids with good test scores, even if they are not necessarily well educated.

performance, and because money is a basic commodity, the process then turns student scores into a commodity."

In the first cheating scandals, we already saw some of this dynamic occurring. The cheating was organized and carried out by numerous teachers and administrators working in concert, the same way less productive farmers might attempt to pressure more successful colleagues, through social and political pressure first, but then, in desperation, sometimes through active protest or sabotage. It's not right, but it happens.

When student scores become like orange juice, pork bellies, or yen, the people with the greatest incentive to cheat are the weakest teachers and administrators. These people might be weak, but that doesn't mean they are stupid. Weak but clever educators will inevitably find ways to game the system, sometimes by cheating, but more often by coming close, but not stepping over the line: Educators could turn their courses into nothing but test-prep machines; they could refuse to collaborate with colleagues; they could curry favor with students to encourage better results; or take other steps we can't imagine. Many of these weaker teachers, even short of cheating, might well end up with excellent "value added" scores, while stronger teachers who are honest and don't play the sharp game end up looking bad.

This is not just a possible bad outcome, it is inevitable. It is inevitable because markets generate such behavior and dislocations, and the more volatile the market, the greater the undesirable behavior and dislocations will be.

So when we speak about value-added evaluations, let's be clear about what kind of knot we've tied. It is a system that turns student scores into a market and, as such, creates cheating, disreputable practices, and dislocations. On the flip side, let's also talk straight about the cheaters. Like dishonest or corrupt traders, the educators are not the victims, but rather sophisticated, savvy players. Many will get away with it and be honored for their work, as some cheating administrators and teachers were before they were caught. And many teachers and administrators who don't technically cheat, but find ways to game the market "legally" will also be duly honored. Where could this lead? Schools could become little more than test-preparation institutes, ignoring subjects and skills that are not assessed, with faculty members who resent and distrust one another. Meanwhile, many honest and dutiful teachers will go down in flames.

If this is the kind of public school system the American people want, then fine. Let's just be honest about it.

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