

Two Roads Diverge for American Education

We can move ahead into a command-and-control era or forward toward more collaboration.

By Arthur H. Camins

We are at a fork in the road in American education. At this moment, we have to choose which road to travel — and that choice will make all the difference.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan is seizing this moment and wielding federal funds in order to precipitate a radical (and, I believe, undemocratic) change in education. He is promoting charter schools, rewards for success, and prescriptive control of those schools that aren't making adequate progress. The Administration's proposed ESEA reauthorization, *A Blueprint for Reform*, could codify a dramatic change in education policy that favors a competitive, market-based approach to education reform.

But there is another road, one that has yet to be paved. That road includes building expertise and internal capacity in learning organizations in every school. While Secretary Duncan's road leads backward to a command-and-control era, this second road runs forward toward collaboration.

Several factors make this a transformational moment. First, the information revolution means not only that everything we say, write, and do is open to public scrutiny, but also that it soon will be possible to tie very specific information about student learning to individual teachers and principals. We will be making critical decisions about how to use that information, for what purposes, and based on which values.

Second, we're coming to realize that economic prosperity and democracy won't be sustainable unless we address the persistent racial and socioeconomic gaps in education attainment. And third, there is a widespread concern that the United States is falling behind other countries when it comes to teaching our children the skills of problem solving, persistence, critical and creative thinking, collaboration, application of knowledge in novel situations, and knowing how to learn.

If we're to make informed choices about which road to travel, we need to examine the following questions.

Will we settle for some good charter schools for some students?

The Education Department's push for charter schools rests on several assumptions. The first is that schools can compete like restaurants do, and, if they do,

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they'll either improve or go out of business. In fact, most entrepreneurial business ventures do fail, and a substantial number of charter schools close their doors each year. But, when a restaurant closes, all that may be lost are money and some less-than-tasty meals. When schools lock their doors and disrupt education, the losers are the children. While a certain level of instability is integral to the evolution and vitality of our economy, that's not a viable strategy for school reform — assuming that our goal truly is to leave no child behind.

A second justification for charter schools is that, freed from excessive control and regulation, they'll be an incubator for innovation. The recent history of innovation in business supports the idea that giving people “space” and encouragement for creative thinking spurs new ideas and improvements. However, there is no evidence that most charter schools are any more innovative than other public schools. Innovation is not determined by how a school is governed, but by ideas, values, and leadership. In addition, regardless of the environment, innovations often are doomed by underfunding, a too-narrow focus, and the ubiquitous impatience for results.

The notion that innovations spawned in charter schools will spread to other schools also has proven to be false. Even in business, an innovation rarely “goes viral.” While certain technological advances — such as eBay, the iPhone, and Twitter — have spread rapidly and modified behaviors, schools have been far slower to change. This may be due in part to the bureaucracy in which schools operate, or it may be that it's simply easier to copy products or service delivery models than to replicate the complex set of variables and conditions that lead to a first-rate education.

If charter schools are, on average, no more effective and no more innovative than regular schools, and if they fail to promote or spread innovation, what is their purpose? First, because the total budgets for public education are finite, charter schools draw funds away from, and thereby undermine, the rest of the public schools. Second, even when charter schools select students by lottery, they tend to draw students from more stable families, leaving the remaining schools with an increased percentage of students with greater challenges. At best, charter schools represent a values choice to educate selected students at the expense of all the rest.

While Secretary Duncan has said repeatedly that he supports only effective charter schools, he can't guarantee their success. Taken to scale, the charter strategy implies a continual cycle of funding and defunding experiments, with students as the ultimate losers. To promote this competitive model is to assume that it's acceptable to deliberately create a sys-

tem in which some students are winners and others are losers. That is not a road I want to travel.

Will rewarding some teachers for success bring improvement for all?

Another road that I hope will be on the nation's “less-traveled list” is the expansion of performance or merit pay schemes. These plans are based on a notion of motivation and human behavior in which extrinsic rewards figure prominently. The logic is that financial rewards for better performance will either spur less-effective teachers to improve or will attract more talented people. However, evidence suggests that an emphasis on extrinsic rewards leads only to superficial and short-term gains and, in the worst circumstances, invites people to game the system in unethical ways. The recent financial debacle involving subprime mortgages highlights the dangers of such short-term reward systems.

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More important, such pay schemes are ineffective. As long as they're fairly compensated, educators are typically among the wage earners least motivated by the promise of greater financial reward. In addition, modern management theory rests on the notion of collaboration, but merit pay systems tend to foster secrecy and competition among educators, rather than collegial learning and mutual improvement. It would be more productive to target federal funds to the restructuring of the teacher work day, including building in time for shared reflection and planning that draws on content-specific expertise.

Will we use data to inform or control?

Information about what students understand, gaps in their learning, and their progress with respect to standards are essential components of teacher growth and evaluation. The quality of such judgments rests on whether the standards measure what's valued. Current state-mandated tests don't measure the academic skills mentioned above, nor do they take into account the valuable nonacademic talents vital for democratic participation in community life, such as the ability to work and live in diverse environments or a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others.

The new Common Core standards may lead to better assessments, but testing instruments for those standards are at least four years away. But, even if we had tests that measure student growth, there remain many caveats. For example, we still can't fairly and

accurately attribute variation in student outcomes to an individual teacher. And attaching consequences to our current assessments is unacceptable for two reasons. First, those assessments reward the low-level skills that the new standards are meant to replace. Second, because their shortcomings are well-known, using them to make judgments about teachers would be widely regarded as unfair and would encourage people to game the system.

We need to devise better ways to precisely capture the qualities that make some educators more effective than others.

If we admit that our measures have limits and we don't use them beyond those limits, teachers and principals will use them. Educators will embrace data that monitors the same students' performance over time, rather than comparing different groups of students. They will also welcome having students' previous learning taken into account. Thus, if we design an assessment and evaluation system that requires teachers to use such data, they will face that challenge. However, if we use these tests to judge teachers while ignoring the known problems, then teachers will conclude that we don't support and value their work and will behave accordingly.

Will prescriptive control lead to improvement, and at what price?

If less external control and more space for innovation are desirable characteristics of effective schools, then the federal policies for persistently low-achieving schools are leading us down the wrong road. For these schools, the message is, "You've had ample opportunity to improve, but you've chosen not to do so. Now, *we* will impose some control to *make* you improve." At the same time, such schools are expected to attract highly skilled teachers. However, effective teachers need the flexibility and creativity to meet the needs of diverse students. Thus, it's illogical to impose the tightest controls on the most struggling schools. Creative teachers won't be attracted to such schools. And even if effective teachers could be assigned to such schools, the increased controls would do nothing to improve the overall efficacy of the entire teaching force. The constant threat of takeover, public humiliation, transfer of students, and loss of employment makes teachers and principals risk-averse — the opposite of what is needed to successfully address the pernicious historical effects of poverty and racial discrimination. In the end, prescriptive control is a strategy destined, at best, to improve *a few* schools for *a few* students while the masses continue to struggle.

Is democracy for everyone?

The strategies being promoted by the federal government and its foundation-based supporters are not democratic. By design, they offer solutions for only selected schools. In addition, they show a lack of faith in the ability of people to make sound decisions. The four turnaround models in the School Improvement and Race-to-the-Top grant regulations — coupled with the proposed flexibility for Reward schools and prescriptive control for Challenge schools in President Obama's proposed ESEA reauthorization — suggest that democracy is preferred only when the results are deemed desirable by those in authority.

Clearly, there are teachers and leaders who urgently need to dramatically improve their practices — and a few need to find other careers. However, most educators are already doing what they know how to do, as well as they are able. A systemic strategy would focus more attention on supporting and improving the effectiveness of the vast majority of skilled and well-meaning teachers and less on firing the small minority who are incompetent. If we're successful in raising the skill level of the many in substantive ways, an emerging culture of mutual responsibility for effectiveness will force out the few nonperformers; thus, we will achieve the same goal of removing the incompetent while we also create a stronger teaching force. Such strategies must be predicated on investment in teachers and principals as the prime agents of change. Unfortunately, schools today are rarely structured to promote adult learning. Limited time for reflection and collaboration, coupled with top-down sanctions, make it very difficult for schools to become healthy learning organizations that foster transformational, democratic change.

Race- and class-based achievement gaps are persistent precisely because they're not subject to simple solutions. There is no argument that we should assign skilled teachers with high expectations to schools led by effective principals. But we need to devise better ways to precisely capture the qualities that make some educators more effective than others. We need to learn more about how to transfer and adapt this knowledge to the vast majority of teachers and leaders and to create the conditions in which others can experiment and occasionally fail without fear of dire consequences. We need to focus more attention on improving the professional culture of schools and on raising the level of public respect for educators in order to increase the attractiveness of the profession.

The rush to turn data into a basis for reward and punishment will undermine, rather than unleash, creativity. We need to focus not on rewarding individual superstar teachers, principals, and districts, but on ensuring and accelerating improvement by all. **◀**