

How school reform preserves the 'status quo' — and what real change would look like

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: May 29, 2013

If you follow the education policy debate at all, you know that critics are often called “defenders of the status quo” by people pushing market-based school reforms. Here is a piece about why it is actually the reforms that are preserving the status quo — and what real reform would actually look like. It was written by Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. His writing can be accessed at <http://www.arthurcamins.com/>.

By Arthur H. Camins

A moment after my train pulled to a final stop in Hoboken this morning, another train on my left pulled away provoking the perception that I was rolling forward. Had I not glanced to my right to see the stationary platform I might have been fooled into thinking I was actually moving. So it is with the current education reform strategies — the illusion of movement without looking around at the evidence.

There are two pillars of Department of Education policy: increased numbers of charter schools and consequential use of standards-based assessment for promotion and employment decisions. Rather than citing evidence of causal connections to substantive changes in educational inequity, supporters claim state and local adoption of these reforms as progress and accuse critics of [defending the status quo](#).

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has declared many times that he believes in using data. I do too. Several features of that status quo are unarguable. Evidence suggests two conditions that contribute to lower average levels of achievement of poor and lower-middle class students. First, on average the conditions of their lives mean that compared to their more well off peers, they enter and continue through school with fewer supports for learning and greater stress that impedes learning. Parents' socioeconomic status and educational attainment level — in other words poverty — explain a very substantial portion of the variation in students' level of achievement and predicts future employment and income. Second, teacher experience and expertise are not equally distributed across schools.

I will argue that the pillars of current education reform are more likely to preserve rather than change the status quo. Further, there are alternative policies that are more likely to mediate educational inequity, creating real rather than illusory movement. None of the pillars of reform

will address either of these conditions at scale. Instead, they merely give some students a competitive advantage. Even if reforms redistribute these benefits or slightly alter the size of the advantaged group, they are still essentially maintaining the status quo, creating the illusion of movement, without fundamental change.

Pillar I — Expansion of Charter Schools

Theoretically, charter schools (relatively few in number and often located in poor neighborhoods) are free to attract the best teachers, giving them a competitive advantage to provide an attractive alternative to remaining neighborhood schools. Therefore, by design they do not address the overall effectiveness of the entire profession, nor do they alter the imbalance in the distribution of teachers' experience or credentials between schools that serve the well off and the poor. In fact, coupled with the intense threat of student assessment-driven firing this policy makes it more difficult for the remaining neighborhood schools to attract effective teachers.

Also by design, [charter schools](#) provide choices to some students to escape their local schools without systemically addressing the conditions in the schools or neighborhoods in which students live. There is no evidence to suggest that inter-school competition for students or relaxed regulation yields systemic improvement or innovation. Overall, charter schools are no more effective than the schools they claim to be outperforming. The idea of providing choice, when comparative effectiveness is the arbiter, is just about fairer competition for still limited opportunities, not overall improvement. To the individual parents with an option, picking a school with a strong reputation may seem like forward motion, but government support for a system that still has winners and losers is ineffective policy that just maintains what we have now.

Current policies that fund increasing numbers of charter schools is not a game-changer because there is no evidence that high-quality charters are a scalable strategy. Some argue that they should be *part* of a solution. However, since they only serve the few based on comparative advantage, this is in the end a cynical idea- a solution for the lucky few. Others argue that they are *the* solution. These folks see results-driven competition as a means to weed out ineffective schools through closings. This implies continual disruption in the lives of the disadvantaged children they are meant to serve. Rather than forward movement, it is an exacerbation of current conditions. The publicity around the limited number of effective charter schools creates the illusion of improvement for a few, while everything else stands still. Finally, since the evidence is mounting that charter schools are increasing rather than decreasing class and racial segregation, they are supporting not disrupting the status quo.

Pillar II — Consequential use of Standards-Based Assessments

Secretary Duncan warned assembled researchers at the recent convention of the American Educational Researchers Association [not to throw](#) the high-stakes testing “baby” out with the misuse of assessment bathwater. He asserted that the dirty water sloshing around consequential testing – cheating, narrowing of curriculum, low-demand assessments, distraction from instructional time — did not come from the testing baby. In response to mounting criticism and resistance, he said that he wants multiple measures of effectiveness. It is hard to be against that.

Certainly multiple measures are better than reliance on a single test. Certainly, principals should consider a wide spectrum of evidence-driven factors in hiring, retention and tenure decisions. Maybe, [value-added metrics](#), if their accuracy can be improved, might someday contribute important information. However, the problem is that reformers tenaciously cling to — contrary to the evidence — the notion that precise measurement and related rewards will yield a diminishment in the variation in teacher effectiveness.

No school district or country that has made substantial systemic improvement has done so with a reward system. Nonetheless, Duncan pleaded the case that abandoning consequential use of results from admittedly flawed data would mean a return to the status quo. “Let’s not let the perfect become the enemy of the good,” he said, while attempting to explain away negative unintended consequences with reference to positive ones.

In reality, these reforms preserve rather than challenge the status quo because they do not address the fundamental causes of educational inequity. They preserve the core idea that competition rather than collaboration is the lever for fundamental change. Competition for rewards is only effective for short-term superficial goals while undermining the collaboration necessary for long-term improvement. Since teacher isolation is too often a feature of current school culture, a competitive reward system will only makes this situation worse. Again, we have the illusion of movement while leaving things in place. As many have argued, fostering intrinsic motivation is the only sure strategy for deep sustainable change.

In his AERA speech, Duncan said he wants to make decisions based on evidence. However, evidence will only help if we accurately identify all of the most important features of the problem and only if we use the evidence that we derive from data well. What evidence we use to make decisions is a function of what we value and what questions we ask.

Leaving aside those for whom profiting from an open education market is the primary motivation, current education reformers appear to rest on the value of fairer competition — often referred to as a level playing field. Education reformers love to tell tales of students, teachers and schools who *beat the odds*. The message is, “See, you can do it too, if we just give you a fair chance and you work hard.” Since they are so powerful, moviemakers and politicians never tire of telling stories about individuals who overcome adversity (poverty, petty bureaucrats, recalcitrant unions, etc.) through grit and dogged determination.

However, it is precisely because they remain persistently exceptional rather than the rule that these stories (the real ones, not the movie versions) are more discouraging rather than encouraging. These stories are meant to be inspiring, but I find them irrelevant and distracting from substantive issues. If we continue the focus on beating the odds in education — even if the odds are fairer — but do not decrease and counterbalance poverty-driven adversity or improve the professional culture of teaching, we will never get substantial sustainable improvement.

Ensuring the education of children in a democracy should not be about odds. We don’t need a level competitive playing field. We need a new game — one that is worth playing because it is engineered to not have winners and losers.

How would a new game address some known root causes of [educational inequity](#)? My answer is based on two assumptions. First, income inequality and associated poverty will not disappear soon. All of the calls for college and career readiness, building the innovation economy and training highly skilled technology workers notwithstanding, low-wage service sector jobs in the United States are not going away. Cleaning, landscaping, home health care, shelf stockers and the like are not being replaced by machines. As long as parents still struggle to make a decent living, their children's lives will be challenging. Therefore, if we are committed to equity, we need to mediate the effects of poverty in other ways. Second, improvement will not be accomplished by pushing educators to "step up our game."

A focus on improving the collective culture of schools, rather than individual teachers, has far greater potential for substantive progress.

What would that new game look like?

- 1) **Social Supports:** Inequity with respect to powerfully influential out-of-school factors such as pre-natal and family health care, quality housing, access to substantial healthy meals, and after-school and summer recreation and educational enrichment should be offset with – yes – government supported programs for all families. Wouldn't it be great to be first in the world in these areas? That is a race-to-the-top to support and measure! The Promise Neighborhood program is a step in the right direction, but it too is a competition and is vastly underfunded.
- 2) **Integration:** Equitable learning and learning to live and function together in a democracy demand that classrooms must reflect the racial, ethnic and socio-economic diversity of our society. This should be prioritized not just in local student assignment plans, but also in housing and zoning programs to increase residential integration.
- 3) **Funding Sufficiency:** Two features of current policy and practice must end if we are at all serious about equity: reliance on local property taxes and underfunding of special education. Current federal and state funding for education do not mediate the vast differences in local resources. Put simply, this must change.
- 4) **Universal Pre-School:** Thankfully, the President has made a strong case for an investment in high quality pre-school education. The evidence is compelling enough that it should be universally available in the same way as current K-12 education.
- 5) **Rigorous Teacher Development:** As many researchers have pointed out, no countries that have made substantial educational gains have alternate route or fast-track programs. Instead they have done so through increased competitiveness far into the teaching profession, fair pay and rigorous well-supported clinical training. Doctors must go through a prescribed program of supervised structured internship and residency. There are well-defined practice-based performance gates they must pass through. Electricians and plumbers practice as apprentices before becoming fully licensed. We should expect no less for the teachers who are responsible for educating our children. There are examples of residency programs and clinical rounds around the country that should be adapted and replicated so that they become the norm. We need a well-planned massive investment in teacher pre-service development and induction.

6) **Supportive Professional Culture:** A growing body of evidence suggests that a positive professional school culture characterized by high-expectations, collegial learning and responsibility, and supportive non-bureaucratic leadership are collectively more important in determining student outcomes than individual teacher differences. Unless dedicated time is built into every teacher's workday this will not happen. Lack of time and an emphasis on instructional mechanics have diverted attention from teaching as a deeply intellectual and research-immersed profession and limited teachers' ability to make daily formative assessment a cornerstone of practice. Changing this will require a substantial investment to hire enough teachers and experienced mentors so that this time becomes available or by increasing teacher pay to lengthen their workday. If we must have school report cards, let's include these features as measures of school culture.

7) **Social and Emotional Learning:** The contribution of students' social and emotional health and growth to their academic learning is getting deserved increased attention. Therefore, another feature worth measuring is the extent to which every classroom in every school consistently and systematically provides these supports. The case for this is strong, not just because it is essential to academic learning, but because it supports the larger goals of education in a healthy society and democracy.

8) **Multidimensional Learning:** The arts, science and engineering, social studies, physical education, project-based learning, and immersion in current social issues have all been casualties of the reading- and mathematics-centric testing culture. Each is an essential feature of learning. Without them we fail to capture the imagination and promote the creativity of every child. Such, a well-rounded education for every child – not just the wealthy – would be a game changer.

9) **Balancing Common Direction and Autonomy:** Standards, conceived as fairly broad societal agreements about what every student should know and be able to do, are a necessary counterbalance to everyone being left alone to “do their own thing.” Having worked in and with school systems in New York, Massachusetts, Kentucky and New Jersey, I have seen the results of both under and over prescription.

Too little direction preserves the current diversity of expectations that are grounded in prejudice and support inequity. Over prescription leads to baseless, compliance-minded, creativity-stifling, rigidity. Without a reasonable level of professional and personnel autonomy, no one in any field performs at their best. However, in a democracy debate about standards and their boundaries is healthy. The current debate about the [Common Core State Standards](#) has been sidetracked by its connection to [high-stakes testing](#) and the nagging perception of lack of transparency and influence of market-driven motives in their development. The Common Core State Standards for reading and mathematics and the new Next Generation Science Standards contain potentially transformative elements for deeper transferable learning, but also debatable features. I do not advocate scrapping them now. Instead, [backing off consequential tests](#), because they impede rather than promote substantive change, would create the necessary space for professional development, experimentation, research and revision.

10) **Accountability as Responsibility:** In the current climate, accountability has become associated with blame, threat and punishment. A different interpretation of accountability

suggests accounting for results – as in explaining causes – and then assuming collective responsibility for improvement. If any one of the ideas above could work alone it would be simple. But, it is folly to imagine that something as vital, complex and multidimensional as ensuring educational equity will be solved by simple measures. We need to do it all. Therefore, accountability must be shared fairly across local, state and federal levels.

Back in the 1990's systemic change was the rage. Like engineers, we mapped the education system and its interacting parts, its constraints and external influences. However, systemic design solutions soon gave way to impatience and underinvestment. We traded systemic thinking for thinking about symptoms. My morning train was engineered to make actual forward motion as a sub-system within a transportation system within a larger complex society. The same is true with education. It is time to engineer actual educational movement and put aside illusory partial solutions.

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