A-Plus for vouchers?

In “The Looming Shadow” (Research, Winter 2001), Jay P. Greene of the Manhattan Institute examines whether the threat of vouchers under Florida’s A-Plus program forced the state’s failing schools to improve. The A-Plus program is essentially a top-down accountability system with a voucher add-on. The state grades schools from A to F based on their test-score performance. If schools labeled F fail to improve, their students become eligible for vouchers.

Greene found that the test scores of failing schools did increase. This leads him to jump to the conclusion that the threat of vouchers was the primary reason. However, how Greene can distinguish, based on Florida data alone, the effect of the voucher threat from the effect of being designated a failing school escapes me.

Greene makes an attempt at distinguishing between these two effects by narrowing the comparison to the highest-performing F schools and the lowest-performing D schools (so that the only real difference between the schools was whether they faced the threat of vouchers or not). He notes that the F schools were provided with $600 more per pupil than the D schools, but he finds that taking those resources into account would not change the conclusion. The basic problem remains, however. Given the increased public scrutiny and the stigma associated with being labeled a failing school, we should expect such schools to work hard at improving regardless of whether their students are given the option of a voucher.

North Carolina has a similar accountability system, in that low-performing schools are publicly identified as failing. My Duke University colleague Beth Glennie and I have found that schools that were designated as failing increased their performance the following year more than all the other categories of schools. Moreover, using Greene’s methodology of narrowing the comparison to the highest performing schools in the failing group and the lowest-performing in the next group, we still find that failing schools improved more. In other words, schools in North Carolina exhibited the same pattern of improvement, yet they faced no threat of vouchers. Instead, their performance reflected the response of failing schools to some combination of increased scrutiny, the shame of being labeled a failure, and intervention from state assistance teams.

Given that similar factors are at work in Florida’s accountability system, I suspect that most, if not all, of the improvements in school performance in that state’s failing schools are attributable to the state’s administered accountability system, not to the voucher component of that program.

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Jay P. Greene Responds: Helen Ladd is correct in saying that the Florida A-Plus program was an “accountability system with a voucher add-on,” or, as I put it more forcefully in my article, “an accountability system with teeth.” She questions whether vouchers were the real “teeth” of the A-Plus program, contending that public shame or the threat of reconstitution may have been just as effective, if not more so, as the prospect of vouchers.

Ladd bolsters her claim with evidence from North Carolina that schools labeled as failing exhibited similar patterns of improvement, but without the threat of vouchers. However, her study and others like it neglect to establish that the gains realized by failing schools facing alternative sanctions represent real improvement in student learning. By contrast, my study validated the state test by correlating the state test results with the results of low-stakes national test results. Without establishing the validity of state testing results, it is impossible to know whether the gains made by failing schools in other states were as large as those realized by failing schools that faced the prospect of vouchers in Florida.

Even if sanctions other than vouchers inspired school improvement, my study’s findings would not be undermined in the least. The point of my study was not that vouchers are the only effective sanction. My point was that vouchers were an effective sanction in Florida and that schools needed to have incentives in addition to resources in order to improve. Helen Ladd seems to agree that sanctions are effective at inspiring school improvement, suggesting that we agree on my fundamental point about the crucial role of incentives in school reform.

Old choices

A common shortcoming in research and commentary on school choice is the failure to recognize the extent to which school choice already exists. As a result, a typical theme is that there is “little evidence” on school choice, so that only “preliminary” and “tentative” conclusions can be reached.

This assumption underlies each of the articles in your “When Schools Compete” Forum (Winter 2001). The contributors discuss two limited forms of choice in K–12 education—vouchers and charter schools—when in fact a
large share of the population has always exercised one or another form of choice. As Richard Elmore and Bruce Fuller explain in Who Chooses? Who Loses? “Choice is everywhere in American education. It is manifest in the residential choices made by families. . . . [and] when families, sometimes at great financial sacrifice, decide to send their children to private schools. . . . In all instances, these choices. . . . are strongly shaped by the wealth, ethnicity, and social status of parents and their neighborhoods.”

Furthermore, for decades, higher education in America has flourished as a wide-open system of tax-supported educational choice involving all manner of public and private institutions. Indeed, many failing K-12 public school systems exist side-by-side with networks of thriving public and private universities. Is this not evidence of competition’s long-term success in the education sphere?

Given the widespread existence of choice and competition in K-12 education, it is demonstrably wrong to suppose, as Forum contributor Frederick M. Hess does (“The Work Ahead”), that “Efforts to cultivate competition may thus foster a culture of schooling that is alien to our educational heritage and may create an incentive structure that distorts educational priorities.”

Likewise, in “Finishing Touches,” Robert Maranto states, “The animating theory of school choice has always been that it will not only serve as an escape hatch from dysfunctional public schools but also will spark public schools to improve. Thus far this theory remains mostly untested.” For many low-income parents, choice always has been about equity, about having what other parents take for granted. The idea that the effect of choice is “mostly untested” again highlights the core problem with these three articles.

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**Ripple effect**

As the articles by Caroline Minter and H oxby (“Rising Tide,” Research, W inter 2001), Robert M aranto, and Jay P. Greene show, incentives have the power to change behavior in ways that improve both private and public schools.

When Milwaukee was only a few years into its choice program, the school board did something it had never done before—enacted standards for children to attain in math and reading.

Likewise, a group of parents in Minnesota tell a story of how they long wanted a Montessori elementary school in their community. They tried to cajole, petition, and urge local officials into creating such a program, without success. Then came Minnesota’s charter school law, the nation’s first, in 1991. Lo and behold, as these parents were putting the finishing touches on their proposal, the school district offered them the opportunity to create a new Montessori elementary school.

Ask the superintendents and school boards about the changes they enacted, and they’ll tell you they were planning to do it anyway. That’s what the principals and school leaders said in Florida, when they reacted to the state’s voucher program with an unprecedented campaign to turn around long-failing schools and introduced new reading programs.

**Cloning Houston**

Raise for the Houston school district comes at the expense of cities that have taken similar steps forward. Paul T. Hill (“Digging Deeper,” Feature, Fall 2001) gives a passing nod to Chicago and Community District 2 in New York, but the progress in Houston is becoming less rare than Hill suggests. New data from Charlotte and Sacramento indicate comparable advances. A second tier of cities—including Fort Worth, Long Beach, Norfolk, Boston, Indianapolis, Louisville, San Diego, and Minneapolis—are posting gains that may be short of Houston’s, but are exceeding their respective state averages. Moreover, cities like Baltimore and Cleveland are transforming themselves and have shown impressive spikes on state tests in recent years.

Hill should also know that urban schools are not governed by gypsy superintendents who wander the nation in search of leadership positions. In fact, only nine of the superintendents in the nation’s largest urban school systems have ever been superintendents in another major city (which is less than the number of nontraditional superintendents now running major school systems, of which there are 11). Only one—Boston superintendent Thomas Payzant—has headed two other major systems, and he can hardly be described as nomadic.
Civic education

David Campbell argues that one of the primary goals of a public education is to teach children “the ability to deliberate” in a setting of “mutual respect among persons.” But fostering mutual respect for persons of different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds is not part of our secular concept of American democracy. Moral tolerance is a normative, private virtue, not a public good. Perhaps this explains why students at religious schools score higher on measures of civic participation (volunteering in the community) than public school children. The more fruitful avenue of research, based on what Campbell has told us, is to look at how private secular schools are serving our political system.

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David Campbell’s article “Bowling Together” (Research, Fall 2001) struck a chord with me as both an educator and a father. For 15 years as a college president, I watched each incoming freshman class exhibit less civic engagement and more cynicism toward political processes. Campbell’s conclusion, that religious schools, and Catholic schools especially, have a favorable effect on developing civic participation, came as no surprise to me. With my own children in both public and religious schools, I have seen significantly more emphasis on understanding and being active in government in the religious schools, including yearlong studies in preparation for major trips to Washington, D.C., and the state capital.

It is a shame that the pendulum has swung so far toward the separation of church and state that we have difficulty acknowledging the role church-related schools might play in strengthening education in America. A president of Pepperdine University, when I was asked whether I thought there was something “artificial” about having a religious emphasis in an academic environment, I generally responded that it seemed more artificial to me to look at subjects from every conceivable point of view except the spiritual. The big difference in most religious schools is not that they indoctrinate, but that they raise topics such as moral, ethical, civic, and spiritual matters that teachers in public schools cannot or dare not address.

Nevertheless, I’m not certain that Campbell’s use of community service as a measure of civic participation is a good predictor for voting patterns and other forms of adult civic engagement. The current pattern on college campuses, where students can both volunteer and vote, is that they do the former and not the latter. Community service is at all-time highs on college campuses, voting at all-time lows. As the old bumper sticker says, we need citizens who will think globally as well as act locally.

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Promoting patriotism

Diane Ravitch's lament that public schools no longer teach a common culture (see “Ex Uno Plures,” Forum, Fall 2001) is even more relevant after the events of September 11.

Our greatest challenge is to prevent more terrorism, but our greatest opportunity is to harness the renewed sense of civic pride to make our country permanently stronger. This will not be easy. Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone, says that national tragedies have often been followed by an upward spike in civic engagement. Only in the case of Pearl Harbor did it last. Americans who lived through December 7, 1941, changed their way of living; they grew victory gardens, bought war bonds, rationed gas, and even welcomed hitchhiking servicemen, getting them where they needed to go. World War II, building as it did on the suffering of the Great Depression, created a new civic mindedness.

One way that public schools can make the changes of September 11 more lasting is to start each school day with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by a student or faculty member explaining “what it means to be an American” for three minutes. A student of Kurdish descent might talk about why Americans don’t persecute all Muslims just because some Muslims are terrorists. A teacher might explain why we say “In God We Trust,” but we don’t trust government with God. A principal might discuss why some civil liberties extend even to people who try to kill us. Ravitch reminds us that the historical mission of the common school included helping children learn what it means to be an American. Teaching American values in the context of reciting the pledge would honor the victims and heroes of September 11 as well as honor the reason why public schools exist in the first place.

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