Costly estimates

In the article “Exploring the Costs of Accountability” (Feature, Spring 2004), James Peyser and Robert Costrell discuss the critical question in K–12 education finance today: How much will it cost for a school with a particular set of student needs to meet a state's expectations for performance?

Over the past several years our firm has estimated the cost of an “adequate” education in several states; most of these analyses were completed before the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act became operational. We are currently helping a state estimate the costs that can be attributed directly to NCLB.

The authors conclude that NCLB’s critics “greatly exaggerate the shortfall of federal resources.” To make that conclusion, however, requires a full accounting of the costs likely to be incurred, including the expense of building accountability systems, undertaking school improvement, providing supplemental services, hiring highly qualified personnel, making schools safe, and managing information. The authors’ suggestion that states could use a “triage” approach to focus resources on the most needy schools confuses what is likely to happen, based on the available resources, with what needs to happen in order to meet state and federal standards.

Where we disagree most with the authors is about how best to estimate the indirect costs of NCLB—the costs associated with meeting targets for adequate yearly progress. The authors reject two widely used approaches to making such estimates despite the acceptance of these strategies by state legislatures and courts.

The dismissal of the “professional judgment” approach eliminates a rational way of thinking about a hypothetical situation when research and statistics have not addressed the issue with any definitive conclusions. The authors are more supportive of the “successful schools’ approach because it is based on some evidence of relative performance. While they prefer to focus on academic growth rather than on absolute levels of achievement, they choose to consider only the aggregate improvement in test scores. Aggregate improvement is one useful piece of evidence in the absence of full value-added information, but it is subject to error when used in isolation.

Given that every approach has limitations, it makes sense to us to gather information based on as many approaches as data will support and use the results to ensure that school districts have adequate resources.

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The new Head Start

Ron Haskins asks whether Democrats should go along with the Bush administration’s new vision for the Head Start program (“Competing Visions,” Feature, Winter 2004). I am one Democrat who will concede that the administration is on the right track in pushing Head Start to pay more attention to children’s cognitive skills.

My own and other studies show that children from low-income families enter kindergarten a year to a year and a half, on average, behind middle-class children in their language and many other cognitive skills. This is a gigantic lag considering that they are only five to six years old. Moreover, children’s early skills are the strongest predictor of their long-term achievement. Anything short of a serious effort to give disadvantaged children a better chance of succeeding in school is irresponsible.

As Haskins points out, the early childhood education community has resisted a focus on academic skills in Head Start, concerned that attention to academic skills will dilute efforts to promote positive social and emotional development and that the comprehensive health services that Head Start currently provides will be abandoned. The community is also concerned that the teaching strategies that will be implemented to improve academic skills will not be appropriate for young children.

These are legitimate concerns. Closing the achievement gap will require more than teaching young children basic pre-reading and math skills. Social skills and emotional adjustment are strong predictors of students’ academic performance and their effective functioning as adults. Physical health and well-being also affect learning, and have value in their own right. But there is no reason why Head Start can’t give more attention to cognitive development while still keeping its commitment to comprehensive services and other aspects of development.

Now to the issue of how. My own and others’ research suggests that some strategies for teaching children acade-
mic skills may do more harm than good. Middle-class children do not achieve their academic advantage by writing the letters of the alphabet and counting to ten over and over. Children learn best, and enjoy learning most, when they are actively involved in authentic activities—being read to, telling and discussing stories, identifying and sounding out the letters in their names, counting and grouping objects, measuring ingredients, and so on. The teacher’s role is to structure activities, ask questions, guide children’s explorations, and assess their skills and understanding to ensure that well-articulated learning goals are being achieved.

We don’t need to make children ready to learn. They are born ready to learn, and most are quite eager learners. We can, however, easily squash that eagerness. I hope the Bush administration will provide the resources needed to prepare teachers to implement effective teaching practices and develop an accountability approach that will promote effective teaching rather than teaching that will turn children off from learning before they even start school.

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Inventing an ideology

Jonathan Burack argues that a “global education ideology” has “captivated” social studies experts in recent years, resulting in a curriculum that is “deeply suspicious” of both American institutions and our role in the world (“The Sun Sets on the West,” Feature, Spring 2004).

Like many previous critics of social studies, Mr. Burack relies on a few quotes taken out of context to shock his readers into concern that an “antiwestern” bias has taken over the education of our youth. The “global education ideology” described by Burack is largely his own creation. Though there are a number of scholars in the field of social-studies education who focus on global studies or global education, they are an intellectually diverse lot and are far from unified on questions of curriculum content and ideology.

While Burack argues that global education’s believers “exercise a strong degree of influence among textbook publishers,” many of the problems he describes with the treatment of global diversity are a reflection of the textbook production and marketing process rather than the result of a conspiracy among educators.

Burack seems to suggest that we should deemphasize criticism of western hegemony in global affairs. He forgets the powerful role that western and U.S. militarism and economic clout have played in world affairs and in the domination and subjugation of many of the world’s peoples and material resources over recent centuries. Historically, our schools have imparted what amounts to a white studies curriculum via the glorification of western leaders, institutions, and traditions. If Burack has his way, schools will regress to a 19th-century focus on traditional history and the concomitant aversion to asking deep questions.

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Benefits of the C-minus

It was a pleasure to read “The Gentleman’s A” (David N. Figlio and Maurice E. Lucas, Research, Spring 2004), in part because it accords with common sense. The teacher you remember from your youth is not the easy grader who let you get away with a weak performance; it is the tough one who gave you a challenge and was not easy to please. I know that researchers usually prefer “counterintuitive” results, but in matters like these it is often the case that science is better judged by common sense than common sense by science.

It would be interesting to learn the authors’ view of the importance of sustaining students’ self-esteem. Is it better for less able students to receive high or low grades? Do high grades encourage them to do better than they otherwise would do, or do such students do worse because they live in a fool’s paradise, ignorant of their true capacities?

It would also be nice to know the characteristics of tough graders. Are their IQs higher or lower than those of easy graders? Are they more likely to be liberal or conservative? And what about sex, religion, and union affiliation? What do they think they are accom-
A fine study is one that raises more questions than it answers.

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Why not choose teachers?

Paul E. Peterson and William G. Howell’s article, “Voucher Research Controversy” (Check the Facts, Spring 2004), was informative regarding the academic debate over school choice. I am struck, however, by how the debate has focused on parental choice of schools.

Previous research has shown that teacher quality contributes more to student achievement than anything else a school does. So why not allow parents to choose their children’s teachers as well?

Enabling teacher choice in a formal way could yield a number of benefits. For one thing, the prevailing method of compensating public school teachers—higher pay for additional years of experience and schooling—has not been shown to correlate consistently with improved test scores. By contrast, teacher choice would identify which teachers are most “in demand” among parents and therefore deserving of increased compensation. Those in the least demand could be replaced.

The practical obstacles to such a system are formidable, not the least of which is the teacher unions’ contention that all teachers are equal and thus deserve equal pay. Nevertheless, as a vision for change, it deserves consideration. Imagine what the power of choice might do for public education if consumers were to scrutinize test scores as intensely in choosing teachers as they do when buying real estate.

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