Correspondence

Choice Benefits

The most intriguing aspect of the study of the relationship between the proportion of pupils in nongovernment schools and achievement on the PISA international comparisons (“School Choice International,” research, Winter 2009) is its use of data from 1900 to identify countries with a history of competitive education systems. Almost every country in the world has had a sector of elite private schools for the children of privilege. It is only under a special set of circumstances, however, that a nongovernment sector of schools rivaling public schools in providing popular instruction has developed in some countries. The principal example of this among the Western democracies has been the creation of alternative systems of Catholic schools in countries with a significant Catholic population but a public school system considered by the church hierarchy inappropriate for Catholic children.

This is a history that my own books have traced for dozens of countries, from the perspective of educational freedom and the rights of conscience of parents and their children. West and Woessmann give it a completely new twist, however, showing the significant unanticipated consequences of these developments for the quality of education as measured by academic outcomes. West and Woessmann demonstrate that despite all the warnings by supporters of the common state school, the existence of an extensive sector of alternative schools is of benefit to everyone.

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IES under Whitehurst

When Andrew Rudalevige interviewed me for his recent article (“Juggling Act,” features, Winter 2009), the National Board for Education Sciences, an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) advisory board that I chaired, had not yet completed its congressionally mandated report on the performance of IES. It is now final and available at the institute’s web site.

Rudalevige and the board agree that IES has made exceptional progress in improving the rigor and relevance of education research. We also agree that much of the progress is due to the well-crafted authorizing legislation, the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), which established the institute and is currently awaiting reauthorization. Because ESRA led to such strong results, the board recommended its reauthorization with few changes. My view is that there is no reason to rush reauthorization, because the act is working well.

The institute’s exemplary performance is due in large part to its first and only director, Russ Whitehurst, who completed his term in November 2008. Russ is known for his interest in “what works” with a concomitant emphasis on field experiments, and his greatest legacy may be his attention to infrastructure. He implemented high-quality peer review systems for grants and reports, a continuously improving What Works Clearinghouse, a revamped Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) system, and multidisciplinary pre- and postdoctoral programs that attract and train promising researchers.

Yet much work remains. I advocate an R&D approach based on large-scale, practitioner-generated changes in policy and practice, which are studied using strong designs and methods before being widely implemented. Such studies should be designed to tell us if the changes are effective and provide ideas about why. I also think we need an improved understanding about how practitioners acquire and use research findings.

Despite the successes of ESRA and IES, this enterprise is fragile. President Obama will appoint the next director of IES and nominate members for 9 open seats on the 15-member board. Given Whitehurst’s impact, the next director will obviously influence the direction and functioning of IES. The president has a number of pressing issues to tackle immediately—altering how the federal government funds education research isn’t one of them.

Robert C. Granger
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Milwaukee Choice Finance

Robert Costrell’s analysis of school choice finance in Milwaukee (“Who Gains, Who Loses?” research, Winter 2009) fills a gaping void. Throughout the 18-year history of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, misinformation about its fiscal impact has been widespread. Three factors explain this.

First, the subject is complicated. Connecting the dots is a major challenge.

Second, many school choice opponents are indifferent to the facts. They knowingly misstate the program’s impact on taxpayers.

Third, the Wisconsin news media has been missing in action. Costrell has done what a host of political and education reporters have failed to do. Their failure has enabled misinformation to proliferate.

Will the news media take advantage of the homework that Costrell has done for them? That remains to be seen.

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Home Schooling

I read Milton Gaither’s fine piece on home schooling (“Home Schooling Goes Mainstream,” features, Winter 2009) as I was preparing for an evening meeting of the board of directors of the South Carolina Association of Independent Home Schools (SCAIHS). Gaither’s essay reminded me of how much this part of the education landscape has changed since the mid-1980s, when my wife and I began teaching our children at home. Police officers now seldom serve truancy citations to home-schoolers (in 1990 in our case). Indeed, home-schooling families now enjoy a level of public support and admiration as well as generally positive press.

Though these “Anabaptists of American education,” as I called parents who have opted for home-based schooling in The Dissenting Tradition in American Education, are certainly an increasingly diverse lot, they are united by a common commitment to the proposition that parents, not the state, have the primary right and responsibility to direct the upbringing and education of their children. They are, in columnist David Brooks’s words, “more spiritually, emotionally, and physically invested in their homes than in other spheres of life, having concluded that parenthood is the most enriching and elevating thing they can do.”

As Gaither points out, the growth of home-based education has added to the increasing diversity of educational options. The “hybridization” of home schooling has, along with other choice mechanisms and recent Establishment Clause interpretation, blurred the line between government and private educational spheres. As these characteristics were features of education in our colonial period, home-schooling families are reclaiming what was once a primary function of the household.

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Milton Gaither correctly notes that the variety of people practicing home schooling and their pedagogical practices has notably broadened. And he is correct in saying that home schooling is, in many ways, mainstream. He does, however, miss a few key points.

First, he relies too heavily on one 2003 study that collapsed to six the number of most-important reasons parents gave for home schooling. “Most important” hides the multiple and nuanced reasons parents usually give. The overlap between “religion/morality” and “school environment” obfuscates what portion of the reasons is actually worldview-, philosophy-, or religion-based. Furthermore, caution should be taken in relying on one study that generalized from 239 home-schooled students (and their families) to the 1.1 million or more in the nation in 2003.

Gaither also claims home schooling is no longer a “political movement.” Home schooling clearly continues to be a political (and other) movement because its advocates know they must labor to keep fundamental parental rights over the education and upbringing of children recognized and protected from statist academics and government violation. One of their core beliefs, a millennia-old view, is that parents have a basic right not to put their children under education controlled or “approved” by the state. They continually see attacks on their perspective and practice in courts, legislatures, and academic journals.

Finally, Gaither is correct that the increase in tax-funded virtual charter schools blurs lines in the education arena. Home-school advocates, however, do not have “animus toward government” but philosophically and politically oppose government control, based on what the classical liberal theorist Frédéric Bastiat called “legal plunder,” over the teaching, training, and indoctrination of children in a “free” nation. They want to see state-run schooling diminish and private education increase. Home schooling is a form of private and independent education. Virtual charter schools are public (government) schools at home (PSAH). PSAH essentially places the government into a family’s home and both legally and pedagogically increases state control and influence over children’s knowledge, values, and attitudes while diminishing that of the parents.

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National Home Education Research Institute

Alternative Certification

I applaud Education Next for its research on ways in which nontraditional programs are recruiting individuals of color
into the teaching field. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has accredited Western Governors University, an institution committed to producing more teachers of color for hard-to-staff schools, especially in rural areas. NCATE has also just completed a study of urban teacher residency (UTR) programs. UTRs succeed in attracting teachers of color to teach in urban areas in shortage fields, which traditional programs have failed to do in large enough numbers. Moreover, unlike some other alternative programs, UTRs retain the teachers they have trained in these hard-to-staff schools. In short, NCATE is interested in accrediting break-the-mold programs of high quality.

However, Peterson and Nadler (“What Happens When States Have Genuine Certification?” check the facts, Winter 2009) define “genuine alternative route” as any program requiring under 30 credit hours of coursework; they note, “Of 21 states we consider to have genuine alternate certification, 7 required only that the person pass a test.” While NCATE supports high-quality preparation programs, whether they are traditional or alternative routes, it does not support approaches that place unprepared individuals in classrooms on the basis of a test without an accompanying strategy to build these individuals’ capacity to teach effectively.

The issue is not alternative certification versus traditional routes. Multiple pathways to becoming a teacher, both within and outside of higher education institutions, should be applauded if they are of high quality. Preparing completers who affect P–12 student learning positively and increasing teacher retention are key criteria by which all programs should be measured and held accountable. All things being equal, cost-effective programs that expand access should be favored, whoever provides them. So far, however, in the absence of clear definitions and standards for alternative programs in many states and in response to urgent needs for classroom teachers, programs of questionable quality have been permitted to exist.

We face a national challenge in transforming our education system to reflect 21st-century learning skills and global influences. Alternative providers, and entrepreneurial market forces more broadly, can contribute to this transformation in important ways, but no one should equate the scope of their role with the magnitude of the problem we face in transforming America’s education system.

James G. Cibulka
President
National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

Union Watch

Linda Seebach (“Same Old, Same Old,” features, Winter 2009) asserts that new leadership at both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) signifies no change in these organizations’ policies or positions, a situation she finds untenable. The new national presidents have only been in office since July. Let’s give them a little time before declaring their administrations moribund.

Ms. Seebach does point out at least one change that AFT president Randi Weingarten is advocating—community schools. While the author ridicules the idea, and it is true, Ms. Weingarten’s maiden speech did not provide detail (yes, the devil is often in the details), the idea has considerable saliency among significant segments of the education and policy communities.

The notion of what Ms. Weingarten describes as community schools is not, as Linda Seebach suggests, that schools become the sole providers of all social services. The idea, which was widely tried in California and elsewhere in the 1980s under the name “school-linked services” or “school-based services,” is that students cannot learn when they come to school hungry, or ill, or in pain. Providing ready access to social services, on the school site or nearby, helps to level the academic playing field for these students.

In addition, I can only assume Ms. Seebach’s article was written before Randi Weingarten made her November 17 speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. In that speech, the new AFT president stated, “With the exception of vouchers…no issue should be off the table…” Under the category “no issue,” Weingarten included teacher assignments, tenure, and differentiated pay. Sounds to me like change may be blowing in the wind after all.

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Technology for Learning

Regarding the article “How Do We Transform Our Schools?” (features, Summer 2008), I agree that as organizations continue successful integration of software and web-based solutions into existing teaching methods, the software applications will become more customized; they will have to. The way a student would interact with a web-video player featuring a biology step-by-step video is different from how a student would interact with a web-video featuring a home economics step-by-step video. I remain excited for what lies ahead: TV and Internet media channel convergence is around the corner, and this will significantly assist adoption of video as a learning tool.

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