

March 05, 2013

National Standards, Local Control

Eric Hanushek writes to Deborah Meier on Bridging Differences again today.

Dear Deborah,

Now that I am into my first "Bridging" venture, I see the value of the format. Many discussions of education founder on both differing perspectives and a tyranny of language.

Our prior discussion of the re-authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act leads me to see important agreement even if described as disagreement, but I also see some talking past each other, and I finally see some fundamental differences.

Let me begin with a very important point of agreement. Local decisionmaking on how to provide education is essential, and it is foolhardy to interject top-down management of how schools hire staff, structure educational programs, and monitor what goes on. The intrusion of state and, worse, federal proclamations about how everybody in the school and classroom should perform has little hope of improving our schools.

Historically, states have tried to regulate local schools with the idea generally being preventing local school districts from, in your words, "doing harm." But instead of putting a floor on bad behavior by districts, they tend to put a ceiling on what local districts do. Why, for example, does California believe that it must regulate how local districts do field trips when there are 1,000 districts ranging in size from less than 50 students to over 700,000?

Or, perhaps more controversial, how can somebody in the state capital decide who is prepared to be an effective classroom teacher? These entry regulations, which do little to nothing to guarantee effectiveness, keep many willing and potentially good people out of the profession while adding substantially to costs.

Even worse, who thinks that the federal government can prescribe how each of the 100,000 schools in the country should deal with poor performance of students? In sum, both you and I are in complete agreement that state or federal prescription of how to educate our students is a mistake. Neither knows the capacity of local districts, the demands they face, or the options that are available to them.

But this discussion does open a point of substantial disagreement. I think that the basic principle of accountability—including state versions and NCLB—is that there is a clear statement from the top about what should be achieved while loosening up on how it should be done.

Deborah, unfortunately, you do not distinguish between "what" and "how," and that is a huge problem that, I think, represents our different perspectives.

You speak nostalgically of having over 100,000 school districts, where each local school board and school decided what to produce. The important contrast between then and now is that we then had an agrarian and heavily rural society with very local labor markets and limited migration across the country. Schools provided students prepared for their local demands.

But the world is very different today. First, we have a national labor market where students from one area are very likely to work someplace else and in industries and occupations that differ from those where they went to school.

Second, it is not just a national labor market but an international labor market. The students from California now compete directly with students from everywhere—Belgium, Singapore, and China and India.

There are two interrelated reasons for concern with the state of U.S. education in today's world. Students that do not have internationally competitive skills—as suggested by some of the international assessments of achievement—will not find their future to be rosy. On average, in fact, there is concern that the children of today will not reach the success of their parents, a disheartening reversal of the increasing economic opportunities of the past century.

But, additionally, the success of each individual depends in part on the skills and success of others in society. To economists, this is called an "externality," which means that my success depends in part on the skills of others. If some districts produce unskilled people, we are all hurt.

Let's bring this back to our disagreements. You conflate the idea of local decisions on "how" with local decisions on "what." From my viewpoint, these are very distinct. Moreover, I have no reason to believe that local teachers and administrators have any special insight into the skills that are demanded to compete nationally and internationally. Indeed, I think there are many reasons to believe that local decisions on what to produce will systematically lead us into confusion.

In sum, I believe that local educators should be told what to produce, and then they should be turned loose to do it. Moreover, as indicated by NCLB and by state accountability systems, they should be rewarded for succeeding and punished for not.

Setting learning goals in the face of internationally competitive markets is far more complex than anyone has acknowledged. Making this a responsibility of the federal government invites a politicized process that may or may not serve our purposes. I personally think it is necessary to develop a process that is somewhat insulated from pure politics. One could for example think of convening a panel of educators, labor-market experts, and individuals knowledgeable about the global economy to establish national learning goals—ones that were periodically revisited. And, importantly, it would be essential to base improved measurement of what students should and do know on these standards.

There are also some details of our interactions that, I think, can be easily cleared up. I pay particular attention to rankings on international assessments (PISA and TIMSS) because there is substantial evidence that performance on these is a good index of skills that affect the future of the national economy. Past history shows that aggregate economic growth is closely related to performance on these international assessments. The international tests also give us a clear picture of what levels of achievement are possible.

We don't do very well on these international assessments, and that is a huge problem—maybe even a crisis (at least for our future generations). Projecting the patterns of economic growth into the future indicates that bringing our achievement up to Canada's level by 2023 would yield growth that would imply that every worker for the next 80 years would have a paycheck that was 20 percent higher than expected with our current level of skills.

In my own work I have concentrated on math performance. It is readily measured across nations, and it directly relates to the innovation and invention that has been the hallmark of our economy. At the same time, I do not want to over-interpret this. Math scores are highly correlated with science and reading scores. And none of these measures indicates what the curriculum should look like.

Rick