



If Education Procurement Is Broken, Is Teacher Choice the Answer?

By Mike Goldstein

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Key Points

- In most schools, the end user of education products and programs—the teacher—has little or no control over what gets purchased; education products and programs are bought *for* teachers by school and district leaders.
- This top-down purchasing system creates three hurdles to effective education procurement: (1) half-baked implementation of new programs and technologies, (2) underestimation of the teacher-time costs of implementing new education products, and (3) misplaced priority on using funds to reduce class size or hire more specialists.
- One potential solution to these hurdles is to give individual teachers control of the funds currently spent on them. Such a move would help ensure that teachers receive products and services they actually want and need, significantly increasing the likelihood of effective implementation and maximizing return on investment.

Let's say our government bought exercise bikes, ergonomic chairs, and weekly spinach for all its citizens. After all, they are “good for you,” and the government would receive some great “bulk” prices. Is this a good or bad idea? It's a bad idea, of course. Most individuals would choose not to use them.

For example, in my home the ergonomic chair would have a fighting chance of being used if comfortable. But the bike would be banished to the garage (next to the one already there). The spinach would be thrown away if it were the cheap kind sold in a bag. Even if it were the high-end organic kind sold in a plastic tub, it'd end up on our plates only occasionally. That would be my story. Your mileage would vary.

Instead, fortunately, we have a more proper market. Thank goodness. I have a personal trainer, you jog, she does Pilates, your cousin drinks many protein shakes, and your uncle doesn't exercise. Buying us all bikes in hopes that your uncle finally exercises is a bad idea.

Moreover, entrepreneurs flourish when allowed to invent things for small tribes. The Peloton is a new online biking experience that some people really love. “Ninja gyms” are a niche product nobody could have conceived of a decade ago. Meanwhile, other entrepreneurs try to scale steeper cliffs: new mass-market products that many people will love. Impossible Burger has its name because we all thought veggie burgers would always taste terrible. But it's flying off the grill at Burger King. All this is possible because the end user is the buyer.

Our K–12 system is quite different. The individual teacher is neither in control nor the customer. He or she is “bought for”—by a school leader, superintendent, or other administrator. This, I argue, creates many distortions that lead to the sad stories contained in this AEI report collection. And importantly, entrepreneurs are mostly sidelined and constrained.

I've been on both sides of the K–12 market. I founded Match Education. It's a small Boston non-profit that, over the years, created services purchased by charter schools and districts (e.g., \$100 curriculum, \$2,000 one-on-one teacher coaching, \$3,000 high-dosage tutoring, etc.). We even created, to the best of my knowledge, the only graduate school of education funded primarily by K–12 schools paying \$8,000 placement fees for the right to hire our graduates.

Meanwhile, I was the chief academic officer of one of the largest “districts” in the world, Bridge International Academies, a network of over 900 schools in Africa. In that role, I was the central decider who made various top-down decisions on behalf of teachers.

And as a consultant, I've worked both on behalf of the largest charter networks and districts (the buyers) and for some of the biggest curriculum providers in the nation (the sellers).

From those 20 years of experience, I'd like to offer what I see as the three largest hurdles to effective education procurement.

Half-Baked Implementation of Top-Down Anything

Earlier in 2019 I visited a middle school in an extremely polite midwestern city. (I repeat myself.) The teachers had a new Common Core math curriculum. It was rated “good” by EdReports and backed by philanthropists. So let's call it a “promising program” for this report.

The laudable idea behind this math curriculum is “rigor.” It contains many multistep word problems. Most teachers weren't embracing the new curriculum. But only a few were *fully* rejecting it—leaving it on the shelf and using their preferred materials. Instead, many chose a middle ground. They did half-baked implementation to keep administrators off their backs.

For example, teachers would cover *some* of what was in a typical lesson but would assign homework that eliminated all the more challenging problems. Essentially, they made the new curriculum into something quite similar to the old curriculum.

The curriculum implementation was supposed to be helped along by an outside consultant. The consultant was exasperated. She identified the problem as teachers having low expectations of the students. She was perhaps partially correct.

Yet I was sympathetic to the teachers. The kids arrived to their classrooms in September struggling with the basics. So the new “challenge” problems frequently created cognitive overload for students. You could notice moments when kids would palpably give up during class, even put their heads down on the desks.

Sure, if these were elite teachers, they could make this curriculum work and perhaps even shine. They would somehow concurrently remediate the worst-off kids and explain the complex problems with such clarity that all kids would understand.

But that's a big “if.” If I were an elite basketball player, I could make left-handed layups through contact. I'm not elite, so I can't. And these teachers weren't elite; they were good, hardworking people, but they were not elite.

So whether it was their “fault” or not, any observer would agree that the new curriculum was not “working.” This “promising program” was getting a half-baked implementation because of a reasonable-if-not-ideal reaction by teachers who were seeing their students fail and give up.

When we think of programs, practices, and products that are bought *for* teachers—whether software such as Dreambox, pedagogies such as “no excuses” data-driven instruction, progressive “advisory” programs to begin each school day, or one-on-one teacher coaching—there are three possible outcomes:

1. Full implementation,
2. Total avoidance, or
3. Half-baked implementation.

It's unlikely that something bought for “all teachers” is precisely what a typical *individual teacher* wants. Often, he or she doesn't do a *full* implementation.

Meanwhile, teachers probably can't overtly *reject* it. They can't openly say “I am never taking these laptops out of the box” or “I'll just skip that staff meeting, because I can tell you right now I will never use this response to intervention approach to math remediation.” So “total avoidance” doesn't happen so often either.

What remains? That last one, half-baked implementation, is, I contend, the dominant response out in the real world.

Underestimated Teacher Time

Most schools are good at budgeting cash. School spending is typically within 2 percent of what was budgeted for a given year. But schools are abysmal at budgeting teacher time. “Promising new practices” typically have *large teacher time costs* that schools refuse to model for. Moreover, an expert is often needed to show teachers the new way.

When a corporation adopts a new software system, it tries to budget one-time costs: time for employees to train and cash to pay experts to explain and troubleshoot. Schools don’t typically do that. They refuse to model implementation costs.

Picture a school with a new “laptop-for-all” initiative. There are 30 teachers and 400 kids. The school buys 400 laptops at \$1,000 each.

Let’s say the school needs a minimum of 50 hours of August training for teachers. First, teachers must master basic laptop operations: charging, cleaning, securing, learning software, and so forth. Second, they have to nail the policy layer: privacy settings, borrowing for home use, and what to do when kids play *Fortnite*. Only then can teachers work on the education purposes and fold new lessons into their existing day-to-day routines.

Instead, the school arranges *two hours of August training* from the laptop vendor, two days before school starts. They underestimate the needed time by 25 times. The district refused to honestly estimate the implementation time needed because of teacher contract. District officials perceived the choice as either buying the laptops and having teachers “wing it” without meaningful training or not buying the laptops in the first place.

As I understand it, they could have offered to pay teachers \$40 per hour to attend August training, so long as it was optional. If all 30 teachers participated, that would have added \$60,000 to the price tag. But they didn’t even consider that.

Moreover, another option would be hiring a teacher coach for the whole school year. He or she could help teachers one-on-one, showing each one how to use the laptops in a way that fit the teachers’ preferences, grade level, style, strengths, and weaknesses. Let’s call that a possible \$90,000 expenditure.

Any “normal” results-driven observer would think this is crazy. Instead, they would point out that the question we should ask is about return on

investment. For example, how much student gain would we get for each dollar spent?

Option 1 is \$400,000 for computers plus a “free” two-hour training session. This would result in laptops mostly distributed during study hall or in the last 10 minutes of class, mostly used to play games or communicate with students’ friends, and rarely integrated into core classes. That’s low return on investment—arguably zero “return” on the investment.

Option 2 is \$400,000 for computers plus about \$150,000 in one-time costs for meaningful teacher training and the full-time coach. The absolute cost would be higher, but you might have much higher return on investment—more kids actually using the laptops productively.

Option 3 is \$400,000 to buy 250 laptops instead of 400 and include the training and the coach. Perhaps the 10 teachers who least wanted the laptops would have their wishes granted and be able to opt out. That would leave more of a “coalition of the willing” for the 20 teachers who did get them.

But that’s not the way the superintendent thought about spending. His goal was to tell the school board about an exciting technology program called “laptops for all.” He cared about optics. Option 3 was “laptops for some.” Option 2 cost more cash.

Let me give another example. Restorative Justice is a controversial “promising new program.” I interviewed a number of teachers about it for a consulting client.

I want to sidestep for a moment the debate on whether it “works” or if it is indeed “promising.” I want to instead point out that this program has a huge cost that is not often addressed by its adherents: the opportunity costs of teachers who now solve discipline problems with long after-school or planning-period conversations with misbehaving students (time teachers might otherwise use for grading, planning, parent communication, tutoring, or “life”).

A teacher at a Boston charter school commented to me:

I think in theory, Restorative Justice [RJ] is awesome. Logistically, however, for a teacher’s daily life, it’s really tough and not really feasible unless some tasks are alleviated from our workloads. I’m not sure when in the school day these restorative justice conversations are supposed to happen . . . implied is that they happen during my already booked prep time, which makes my eyes roll.

I'd be more on board with RJ if someone explicitly modeled the time costs for me as a teacher to do this extra work, instead of just piling it on top of everything.¹

A former colleague now teaching at a Vermont public school explained to me:

My school recently adopted a Restorative Justice curriculum. Our experience has been mixed. It's working for me. With a few colleagues, I took a three-credit course that my school paid for.

But we do not have all the staff on board. Many seasoned teachers are hesitant to embrace new ideas and trends, simply because they have tried new ideas so many times in the past, only to be asked to change again after putting significant effort in. They opted out of training, are making their classrooms worse, and seething with frustration.²

Let me also say that I have personally been guilty of this refusal to honestly account for limited teacher time. For example, I believe an excellent teacher practice is proactively phoning parents to build one-on-one relationships. I wrote a book about it, we developed a few videos about it, and we even commissioned a randomized control trial on teacher-parent phone calls. The data showed large academic gains for students whose parents received such phone calls.

But in asking teachers to make these calls, I was never sufficiently willing to explicitly acknowledge the time trade-offs. I was unwilling to tell teachers what they should cut from their already-full workload or to suggest that while I was watching football on Sunday afternoons, they should be working their phones.

The Two-Headed Monster of Class Size and Specialists

In the first years of my charter school, we had a bookstore program. Every student would get \$100 per year, and staff would take kids to Barnes & Noble (remember them?) once a month to find pleasure-reading books. It was a fairly small expense. There was no research per se behind it. But it seemed to be good. Many kids were reading for pleasure, which they'd never done before.

We also had a program with many full-time tutors. It grew to become a national standout and was replicated not just in some charter schools but also in large districts such as Houston, Chicago, and New York City. Randomized trials showed huge gains for kids.

Both programs met the same fate: They were significantly diminished over time. That's because there is a politically attractive alternative to buying promising programs, practices, and products. It's *lowering class size and hiring more full-time specialists*. That's the two-headed monster. It's the most direct response to the never-ending teacher cry for "more help." The monster gobbles up most of the discretionary cash, leaving only a little to invest in promising programs, practices, and products.

Teachers like smaller class sizes because they make the job seem more doable. They like the sound of "more help": another counselor, dean, literacy specialist, math coach, social worker, paraprofessional, librarian, art teacher, or nurse.

It's hard to overstate the pressure school leaders face, particularly from stressed-out teachers, to always cut class sizes and increase head count of specialists.

"Everything else" has much less political protection. Anything out of the ordinary is the first item to be cut or diluted. Why should we give kids books when they can go to the library? Why should we give kids one-on-one tutors when six to one is still a small group?

In healthy organizations, "what works" gets more money. It grows. But in schools, "what works" doesn't stand much chance against the voracious appetite around class size and head count.

Few leaders will openly acknowledge this challenge. Eva Moskowitz is one who does. I love her fearlessness. Here is a small clip from an interview with NPR back in 2011.

Neal Conan: But would you agree with Lisa that in middle school, there is a [class size] tipping point of around 28, 29, 30—which it is counterproductive?

Eva Moskowitz: I don't think it's there. . . . I think that if I had to make the choice between 32 and 34 kids, it would depend on what I would get in the bargain.

In other words, if I could take my kids to trips across the country, and I could hire a tutor to help them in math, those are the trade-offs that we have to be looking at. *It's*

*not; if you think that we're not making choices when we invest in small class sizes, you're not being realistic. There are things we cannot do if we reduce class size.*³

But Moskowitz is an outlier. Most leaders bend to the demand for more specialists and lower class size without honestly making (or narrating) the choices about which practices and programs are lost.

Looking at all three of the largest hurdles to effective education procurement, we see that top-down deciders buy on the cheap for a fictitious average teacher, underestimating implementation costs and investments, which predictably results in half-baked implementation. Nobody wins.

Teachers are hosed. They experience one new initiative after another, a perpetual hazing ritual. Meanwhile, social entrepreneurs can't create services and products that individual teachers would love; those inventors are forced to sell bland products in bulk like everyone else or not exist at all.

What keeps this stupid system propped up? The illusion by top-down deciders that this time, *this time*, they'll get it right.

A Radical Idea

Stanford historian Larry Cuban writes:

Too often wannabe reformers of an engineering mind-set see educational problems as complicated yet amenable to smart technological fixes—say a NASA-like “mission control,” too often overlooking that schools and districts are open systems where zillions of relationships and pieces have to be acknowledged and managed, where resources matter, and [individual] teachers are the central players in working through the complexity.⁴

That's the key point here. Individual teachers are the central players working through the complexity. What if we asked teachers, individually, for permission? There are two ways to seek permission.

The first way is a boutique practice in some charter schools. Permission is asked at the front door, during the recruitment and interview process. For example, “We believe X, Y, Z. That is different from other schools. We all try to row in the same direction, so your individual discretion would be

limited. Are you sure you would want a job here?” I'd estimate this explicit permission seeking happens in less than 5 percent of schools. It isn't scalable.

The second way to seek permission from teachers would be to hand them all the cash.

Teacher-Controlled Funds. What if individual teachers controlled the funding that is currently “spent on them”? All the curriculum, training, coaching, education technology, field trips, and so forth would be bought by individual teachers. This isn't unprecedented: New college professors receive a lump sum “package” to spend however they want—equipment for their lab, conferences, and so forth.

Left-leaning reformers want teacher status, power, and freedom. Right-leaning reformers like choice and markets. This addresses both.

Everything purchased would happen on a genuine opt-in basis. And, importantly, this creates needed opt out. We've all seen what happens when we require a new pedagogy, technology, or curriculum. Some teachers want it; some loudly complain and resist; many do a half-baked embrace.

What if the only category were true opt in? I know what you're thinking. Your reaction reminds me of the Passover seder's “four types of sons.”

Yes, sure, let's help the wise teacher and give him or her discretion. But what about the wicked one who rips off the system, the simple one who makes bad choices, and the one who does not even know how to imagine new ways to spend money?

Donors Choose already does a remarkable job of protecting against wicked teachers who try to enrich themselves. They have the highest possible ratings from Charity Watch, Charity Navigator, and Guidestar, an honor earned by less than 1 percent of charities. They vet field trips, professional development, and even passion projects for individual kids (e.g., giving 10-year-old Joe drumming lessons). They have accounting controls strong enough to review even “questionable” asks they think are in fact legitimate but might look sketchy to the public. They don't allow overtime pay to teachers or any other financial benefit, and they prohibit religious materials.

Next there is the simple teacher who makes bad decisions. Sure that would happen sometimes. In theory, if choice allows many simple teachers to now make bad decisions, who otherwise would have used “good curriculum” and pedagogy with fidelity,

it might outweigh all the gains from good teachers with their newly gained freedoms. To believe this, you have to believe not only that the number of good teachers is quite low but also that the current system currently features many simple teachers implementing the top-down material with fidelity. That cuts against all the evidence.

Finally, at the seder, there is the son who does not even know how to ask a question. I liken that to the fear of a new teacher. He or she has no orientation on how to make decisions, particularly around curriculum and “what is good.” Similarly, I think independently paid advisers would spring up to help teachers with these choices.

Is this more than just a premise that “happy teachers are good teachers”? Definitely. The key idea here is that *the current supply side*—services and goods available to teachers—is not only inefficient but also not specialized enough and not customer friendly enough. The winners (who provide products many teachers want and highly recommend to others, sometimes “just” because execution or service is excellent) typically don’t get rewarded.

If we just gave \$5,000 or \$10,000 to each teacher but left the existing marketplace intact, I predict failure. There needs to be a parallel investment in developing new supplies of teacher coaches, curriculum and education technology curators, “plug and play” field trips, and so forth.

Individual Teacher Choice. You might ask: Hasn’t individual teacher choice been tried before? It’s only been tried in two small ways. One is giving teachers a couple hundred bucks. Of course they use that for school supplies. That’s boring, uninspired, and off by a factor of 30.

The first \$1,000 given to a teacher is invariably sucked up by teachers’ desire for supplies. They buy magic markers, tissues that don’t feel like sandpaper, \$10 headphones to replace the \$1 break-on-contact earbuds the district information technology guy chose to go with the new \$400 iPads.

That’s not what I’m talking about here. The \$10,000 per teacher individual teacher choice effort, by contrast, unleashes the chance for much larger expenditures.

Individual teacher choice has been tried in a form that I call “coerced group teacher choice.” Imagine a second-grade team with six teachers. Teachers A,

B, and C are fairly traditional. Teachers D and E are progressive but have a fair share of disagreements. Teacher F is a mix regarding pedagogy.

If done well, individual teacher choice could lead to higher teacher satisfaction, lower teacher attrition, and increased student engagement.

Currently, their grade team meetings accomplish little. They are faux collaborations. Anyone who has ever sat through these knows that they are often collegial but circular discussions. As a grade-level team, they control some of the budget, but only as a clunky decision-making body.

Now imagine a new reality for these six teachers, with individual teacher choice. Teachers A, B, and F choose to collaborate—and A and B don’t mind that F sometimes pushes them a little on their traditional pedagogy (e.g., “maybe we could do fewer worksheets”). Teacher B also spends \$4,000 on the science field trip he or she always wanted (but none of the other teachers do). Teacher F is the only teacher who loves education technology. Teacher F typically unleashes it for the strong kids, so that he or she is free to spend more small-group time with strugglers. That’s a big investment for Teacher F.

Teacher C is an introvert who likes to work alone and intensely dislikes meetings. This is fine.

Teachers D and E combine their resources to hire the same teacher coach, who works with them individually. The coach unleashes some great new classroom experiences. Teachers D and E still don’t “collaborate”—no coerced efforts to make them plan lessons together and so forth.

One can imagine the net result is much better than the previous coerced meetings of all six, where Teacher C was visibly irritated and Teachers D and E were always outvoted.

Individual teacher choice is admittedly a radical idea. And, of course, if it gains any traction, there will be studies to determine its effectiveness and the challenges of making it work. But that’s a story for another day.

But for now, here's the larger point: If done well, individual teacher choice could lead to higher teacher satisfaction, lower teacher attrition, and increased student engagement—all without any loss in student achievement and likely resulting in

achievement gains in the subset of teachers actually trying to accomplish that. And just as importantly, this would offer one overlooked response to the education procurement challenges that schools face today.

About the Author

Mike Goldstein is an education consultant in Boston. He was the founder of Match Education and chief academic officer of Bridge International Academies. His views are strictly his own.

Notes

1. Interview with teacher.
2. Interview with teacher.
3. Neal Conan, "School Founder Says Class Size Doesn't Matter," NPR, March 29, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/03/29/134956184/school-founder-says-class-size-doesnt-matter>. (Emphasis added.)
4. Larry Cuban, "Skeptic or Cynic? An Interview," Larry Cuban on School Reform and Classroom Practice, May 31, 2018, <https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2018/05/31/skeptic-or-cynic-an-interview/>.

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