educate its children in the principles of science, technology, geography, literature, and the arts. The great challenge to our generation is to create a renaissance in education, one that goes well beyond the basic skills that have recently been the singular focus of federal activity, a renaissance that seeks to teach the best that has been thought and known and done in every field of endeavor.

The policies we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools. Indeed, much of what policymakers now demand will very likely make the schools less effective and may further degrade the intellectual capacity of our citizenry. The schools will surely be failures if students graduate knowing how to choose the right option from four bubbles on a multiple-choice test, but unprepared to lead fulfilling lives, to be responsible citizens, and to make good choices for themselves, their families, and our society.

With the best of intentions, reformers have sought to correct deficiencies by introducing new pedagogical techniques, new ways of organizing classrooms, new technologies, new tests, new incentives, and new ways to govern schools. In every instance, reformers believed that their solution was the very one that would transform the schools, make learning fun, raise test scores, and usher in an age of educational joy or educational efficiency. As one innovation follows another, teachers may be forgiven if, from time to time, they suffer an acute case of reform fatigue.

This constant reform churn is not the approach typically found in countries with successful schools. In November 2006, I attended a meeting of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, an organization of scholars that has been studying school performance in many nations since the 1960s. Two respected testing experts described the lessons learned from decades of mathematics assessments in dozens of nations. As I listened, I copied this list of the essential ingredients of a successful education system: "a strong curriculum; experienced teachers; effective instruction; willing students; adequate resources; and a community that values education."[3] The fundamentals of good education are to be found in the classroom, the home, the community, and the culture, but reformers in the United States continue to look for shortcuts and quick answers.

Far too many reformers imagine that it is easy to create a successful school, but it is not. School improvements—if they are real—occur **incrementally**, as a result of sustained effort over years.

Far too many reformers imagine that it is easy to create a successful school, but it is not. They imagine that the lessons of a successful school are obvious and can be easily transferred to other schools, just as one might take an industrial process or a new piece of machinery and install it in a new plant without error.

More Choices, Higher Scores, and Worse Education

If there is one thing all educators know and many studies have confirmed for decades, it is that there is no single answer to educational improvement. There are no grounds for the claim made in the past decade that accountability all by itself is a silver bullet, nor for the oft-asserted argument that choice by itself is a panacea.

Nonetheless, in the decade following my brief stint as an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education under President George H. W. Bush, I argued that charters and accountability would help reform our schools. Teachers and schools would be judged by their performance; this was a basic principle in the business world. Schools that failed to perform would be closed, just as a corporation would close a branch office that continually produced poor returns. Having been immersed in a world of true believers at the department, I was influenced by their ideas. I became persuaded that the business-minded thinkers were onto something important.

Today, having seen these ideas in action, I see the downsides of both the choice movement and the accountability movement. They are not solutions to our educational dilemmas.

Market Mechanisms: Let 1,000 Flowers Bloom—and 1,000 Wilt?

Charter schools appeal to a broad spectrum of people from the left, the right, and the center, all of whom see charters (as others had previously seen vouchers) as the antidote to bureaucracy and stasis and as the decisive change that could revolutionize American education and dramatically improve educational achievement. Charter schools represent, more than anything else, a concerted effort to deregulate public education, with few restrictions on pedagogy, curriculum, class size, discipline, or other details of their operation.

Have charter schools lived up to the promises of their promoters? Given the wide diversity of charter schools, it's hard to reach a singular judgment about them. In terms of quality, charter schools run the gamut. Some are excellent, some are dreadful, and most are somewhere in between. It is in the nature of markets that some succeed, some are middling, and others fail.

As originally imagined (when Professor Ray Budde[1] and AFT President Albert Shanker[2] each proposed new teacher-developed schools in 1988), charters were intended not to compete with public schools, but to support them. Charters were supposed to be research and development laboratories for discovering better ways of educating hard-to-educate children. They were not intended to siphon away the most motivated students and families in the poorest communities, but to address some of the public schools' most urgent problems.

But a school is successful for many reasons, including the personalities of its leader and teachers; the social interactions among them; the culture of the school; the students and their families; the way the school implements policies and programs dictated by the district, the state, and the federal government; the quality of the school's curriculum and instruction; the resources of the school and the community; and many other factors. When a school is successful, it is hard to know which factor was most important or if it was a combination of factors. Even the principal and teachers may not know for sure. A reporter from the local newspaper may arrive and decide that it must be the principal or a particular program, but the reporter will very likely be wrong. Success, whether defined as high test scores or graduation rates or student satisfaction, cannot be bottled and dispensed at will. This may explain why there are so few examples of low-performing schools that have been "turned around" into high-performing schools. And it may explain why schools are not very good at replicating the success of model schools, whether the models are charters or regular public schools. Certainly, schools can improve and learn from one another, but school improvements—if they are real—occur incrementally, as a result of sustained effort over years.

Our Schools Will *Not* Improve If . . .

Our schools will not improve if we continually reorganize their structure and management without regard for their essential purpose. Our educational problems are a function of our lack of educational vision, not a management problem that requires the enlistment of an army of business consultants. The most durable way to improve schools is to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve the conditions in which teachers work and children learn, rather than endlessly squabbling over how school systems should be organized, managed, and controlled. It is not the organization of the schools that is at fault for the ignorance we deplore, but the lack of sound educational values.

Our schools will not improve if elected officials intrude into pedagogical territory and make decisions that properly should be made by professional educators. Congress and state legislatures should not tell teachers how to teach, any more than they should tell surgeons how to perform operations. Nor should the curriculum of the schools be the subject of a political negotiation among people who are neither knowledgeable about teaching nor well educated. Pedagogy—that is, how to teach—is rightly the professional domain of individual teachers. Curriculum—that is, what to teach—should be determined by professional educators and scholars, after due public deliberation, acting with the authority vested in them by schools, districts, or states.

(Continued on page 16)

In their current manifestation, charters are supposed to disseminate the free-market model of competition and choice. Now charters compete for the most successful students in the poorest communities, or they accept all applicants and push the low performers back into the public school system. Either approach further disables regular public schools in those communities by leaving the lowest-performing and least-motivated students to the regular public schools. It matters not that the original proponents of charter schools had different goals. It does matter, though, that charter schools have become, in many communities, a force intended to disrupt the traditional notion of public schooling. The rhetoric of many charter school advocates has come to sound uncannily similar to the rhetoric of voucher proponents and the most rabid haters of public schooling. They often sound as though they want public schools to fail; they want to convert entire districts to charter schools, each with its own curriculum and methods, each with its own private management, all competing for students and public dollars.

If there is one consistent lesson that one gleans by studying school reform over the past century, it is the danger of taking a good idea and expanding it rapidly, spreading it thin. What is stunningly successful in a small setting, nurtured by its founders and brought to life by a cadre of passionate teachers, seldom survives the transition when it is turned into a large-scale reform. Whether charter schools are a sustainable reform, whether they can proliferate and at the same time produce good results, is a question yet to be resolved. Whether there is the will to close low-performing charters remains to be seen. Whether there is an adequate supply of teachers who are willing to work 50-hour weeks is unknown. The biggest unknown is how the multiplication of charter schools will affect public education.

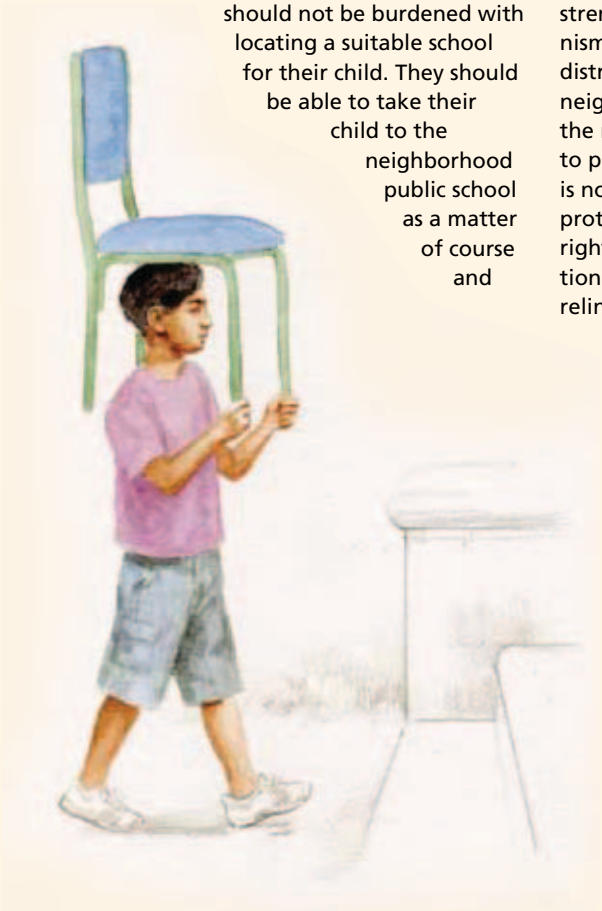
In barely 20 years, the idea of school choice rapidly advanced in the public arena and captivated elite opinion. Given the accumulating evidence of its uneven results, this is surprising. Even more surprising is how few voices have been raised on behalf of the democratic vision of public education.

Why not insist that future charters fulfill their original mission? Why shouldn't they be the indispensable institutions that

rescue the neediest kids? Why shouldn't they be demonstration centers that show what can be done to help those who can't succeed in a regular school? Why not redesign them to strengthen public education instead of expecting them to compete with and undercut regular public schools?

Do we need neighborhood public schools? I believe we do. The neighborhood school is the place where parents meet to share concerns about their children and the place where they learn the practice of democracy. It creates a sense of community among strangers. As we lose neighborhood public schools, we lose the one local institution where people congregate and mobilize to solve local problems, where individuals learn to speak up and debate and engage in democratic give-and-take with their neighbors. For more than a century, they have been an essential element of our democratic institutions. We abandon them at our peril.

Business leaders like the idea of turning the schools into a marketplace where the consumer is king. But the problem with the marketplace is that it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers. Going to school is not the same as going shopping. Parents should not be burdened with locating a suitable school for their child. They should be able to take their child to the neighborhood public school as a matter of course and expect that it has well-educated teachers and a sound educational program.



Our nation's commitment to provide universal, free public education has been a crucial element in the successful assimilation of millions of immigrants and in the ability of generations of Americans to improve their lives. It is unlikely that the United States would have emerged as a world leader had it left the development of education to the whim and will of the free market. The market has been a wonderful mechanism for the development of small and large business enterprises; it has certainly been far more successful in producing and distributing a wide range of high-quality goods and services than any command-and-control economy. But the market, with its great strengths, is not the appropriate mechanism to supply services that should be distributed equally to people in every neighborhood in every city and town in the nation without regard to their ability to pay or their political power. The market is not the right mechanism to supply police protection or fire protection, nor is it the right mechanism to supply public education. Education is too important to relinquish to the vagaries of the market and the good intentions of amateurs.

As currently configured, charter schools are havens for the motivated. The question for the future is whether the continued growth of charter schools in urban districts will leave regular public schools with the most difficult students to educate, thus creating a two-tier system of widening inequality. If so, we can safely predict that future studies will "prove" the success of charter schools and the failure of regular schools, because the public schools will have disproportionate numbers of less-motivated parents and needier students.

American education has a long history of infatuation with fads and ill-considered ideas. The current obsession with making our schools work like a business may be the worst of them, for it threatens to destroy public education. Who will stand up to the tycoons and politicians and tell them so?

Accountability: Narrowing the Curriculum, Sapping Our Strength

I was initially supportive of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Who could object to ensuring that children mastered the basic skills of reading and mathematics? Who could object to an annual test of those skills? Certainly not I. Didn't all schools test their students at least once annually?

As NCLB was implemented, I became increasingly disillusioned. I came to realize that the law bypassed curriculum and standards. It demanded that schools generate higher test scores in basic skills, but it required no curriculum at all, nor did it raise standards. It ignored such important studies as history, civics, literature, science, the arts, and geography. Accountability makes no sense when it undermines the larger goals of education. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: measure, then punish or reward.

NCLB is a punitive law based on erroneous assumptions about how to improve schools. It assumes that reporting test scores to the public is an effective lever for school reform. It assumes that changes in governance lead to school improvement. It assumes that shaming schools that are unable to lift test scores every year—and the people who work in them—leads to higher scores. It assumes that low scores are caused by lazy teachers and lazy principals, who need to be threatened with the loss of their jobs. Perhaps most naively, it assumes that higher test scores on standardized tests of basic skills are synonymous with good education. Its assumptions are wrong. Testing is not a substitute for curriculum and instruction. Good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators, and closing schools.

As we lose neighborhood public schools, we lose the one **local institution** where people **congregate** to solve local problems. We abandon them at our peril.

Tests should follow the curriculum. They should be based on the curriculum. They should not replace it or precede it. Students need a coherent foundation of knowledge and skills that grows stronger each year. Knowledge and skills are both important, as is learning to think, debate, and question. A well-educated person has a well-furnished mind, shaped by reading and thinking about history, science, literature, the arts, and politics. The well-educated person has learned how to explain ideas and listen respectfully to others.

The problem with using tests to make important decisions about people's lives is that standardized tests are not precise instruments. Unfortunately, most elected officials do not realize this, nor does the general public.

The Committee on Appropriate Test Use of the National Research Council stated in an authoritative report in 1999 that "tests are not perfect" and "a test score is not an exact measure of a student's knowledge or skills." Because test scores are not an infallible measure, the committee warned, "an educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score."[3] The committee also held that "all students are entitled to sufficient test preparation" so they are familiar with the format of the test, the subject matter to be tested, and appropriate test-taking strategies. The committee cautioned, however, that the test results might be invalidated "by teaching so narrowly to the objectives of a particular test that scores are raised without actually improving the broader set of academic skills that the test is intended to measure."[4]

Of what value is it to the student to do well on a state reading test if he cannot replicate the same success on a different reading test or transfer these skills to an unfamiliar context? Excessive test preparation distorts the very purpose of tests, which is to assess learning and knowledge, not just to produce higher test scores.

The Committee on Appropriate Test Use could not have dreamed that only two years after its report was published, a law would be passed that established harsh consequences not for test takers, but for educators and schools. Or that only 10 years later, the president of the United States would urge states and school districts to evaluate teachers on the basis of their students' test scores.

A good accountability system must include professional judgment, not simply a test score, and other measures of students' achievement, such as grades, teachers' evaluations, student work, attendance, and graduation rates. It should also report what the school and the district are providing in terms of resources, class sizes, space, well-educated teachers, and a well-rounded curriculum. Furthermore, a good accountability system might include an external inspection of schools by trained observers to evaluate their quality on a regular schedule, though not necessarily every single year. In a state or a large district, low-performing schools might be reviewed frequently, while schools that consistently get good reports might get a visit every few years. The object of inspection should not be to assay the school as a prelude to closing it or to impose a particular way of teaching, but to help the school improve.*

When we define what matters in education only by what we can measure, we are in serious trouble. When that happens, we tend to forget that schools are responsible for shaping character, developing sound minds in healthy bodies (*mens sana in corpore sano*), and forming citizens for our democracy, not just for teaching basic skills. We even forget to reflect on what we mean when we speak of a good education. Surely we have more in mind than just bare literacy and numeracy. And when we use the results of tests, with all their limitations, as a routine means to fire educators, hand out bonuses, and close schools, then we distort the purpose of schooling altogether.

Accountability and choice may or may not raise test scores, but neither is a surefire way to improve education. Higher test scores may or may not be a reliable indicator of better education. The overemphasis on test scores to the exclusion of other important goals of education may actually undermine the love of learning and the desire to acquire knowledge, both necessary ingredients of intrinsic motivation. Investing inordinate amounts of time in test-preparation activities may well drive up the scores. Yet at the same time that scores go up, the youngsters may be ignorant of current events, the structure of our government and other governments, the principles of economics, the fundamentals of science, the key works of literature of our culture and others, the practice and appreciation of the arts, or the major events and ideas that have influenced our nation and the world. And so we may find that we have obtained a paradoxical and terrible outcome: higher test scores and worse education.

–D.R.

*For more on this, see "Rethinking Accountability" in the Spring 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/issues.cfm.

Endnotes

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3. National Research Council, *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation*, ed. Jay P. Heubert and Robert M. Hauser (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999), 275–276.

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