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Moving School Choice Outside The Government Box

By David V. Anderson

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The traditional mindset of school voucher advocates and other education reformers is one of incrementalism. It is a philosophy that emphasizes tweaking a failing system by repairing its broken parts using a dose of competition provided by charter schools, vouchers, and other similar efforts. The idea is to work within the “box” of the traditional U.S. K–12 educational system, both public and private.

In its early years, public education in the United States was locally controlled by the communities in which the schools were located. There was very little interference from state or regional government bodies and none from the federal government. It was a defensible system that would ensure a basic education for all of the children in their communities.

Today, public schools are controlled by forces largely outside of the local community. Even at the school-district level, the move to larger “unified” school districts has eroded local control. Many of the operations of public schools are now dictated at the state and federal levels. Even more damaging, most public school teachers and other system employees are unionized. That has not only led to the usual inefficiencies associated with unionized industries, it has also skewed the school curricula toward the political left.

The public education system in the United States is becoming unquestionably totalitarian. Even some within the education establishment agree. Paul Pastorek, the former Louisiana superintendent of education, once told an audience at Harvard University the U.S. education system is a “communist system.” He then [explained](#) how schools under the former Soviet Union were run in essentially the same way as American public schools are operated today.

As our system has become more centralized and totalitarian, we have seen it lose its pluralistic characteristics. Standards and the curricula that go with them are now being centrally dictated through Common Core standards and other federal mandates. Even schools’ restroom signage is now being dictated from Washington, DC! These edicts are not only in violation of the U.S. Constitution’s 10th Amendment, they are also impediments to a healthy education marketplace.

Education for our children is an important social need, but it is arguably not as important as their need for nutrition. Our society ensures every child has adequate food through a variety of programs, private and public. Food stamps are one such program. But the providers of the food are almost entirely for-profit enterprises. If so, why can’t the providers of education similarly be almost entirely for-profit schools? Education stamps, anyone? As in the food industry, the government provides regulations and standards for those products. Why can’t private schools operate under a similar umbrella of local and state government constraints?

This is not to say voucher systems and charter schools within the United States are failures. A study of these education alternatives that I conducted in 2015 shows the competition among them has led to small but significant improvements of student performance. That same analysis suggests we will wait decades before K–12 schools perform acceptably. Why stay within the box of small-scale reform when we can break out of this straightjacket and allow our free-enterprise system to bring its harvest?

Getting from here to there won't be easy. If we can remove some of the impediments, success would be much more likely. For instance, the next president should close the Department of Education by executive order, based on its unconstitutional status. Courts might try to block that, but the president has the authority to interpret the Constitution differently than the courts—as Abraham Lincoln once did.

Repairing the existing private marketplace of education is something that can be done privately. More vouchers and better consumer information for parents can help build political constituencies for change. Can't something be done to upend the crony capitalism that currently pervades the for-profit enterprises in the education industry? Once K–12 education is back at the state level, we need as few as one state successfully privatizing to help the other states see their way toward education freedom.

The result will not only be efficient schools, but schools that are free of totalitarian propaganda, which would lead to children learning more and then benefiting from that learning in many different ways. They'll be happier, will contribute more to society, and they'll be better citizens.

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