



Growing leaders in education

The Blog

LEARNING ON THE EDge

Which road will we choose?

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By Arthur Camins

Several years ago, I wrote, “We are at a fork in the road in American education. At this moment, we have to choose which road to travel — and that choice will make all the difference.” My view of the two roads remains constant: One builds expertise and internal capacity in learning organizations in every school and runs toward collaboration. The other privileges autonomy for the already successful and charter schools while leading backward to a command-and-control era for everyone else.

We have traveled much further down the latter road than I imagined even in my most pessimistic moments. Charter schools and school closings, value-added, metrics-based teacher evaluation and pay systems and prescriptive turnaround models have all gained momentum, while so-called reform-minded billionaires have influenced elections and administrative hiring around the nation. Perhaps, most disturbing is that this has proceeded despite persistent credible evidentiary challenges, while scholars from around the world have pointed out that no country has made accelerated improvement by relying on market-based policies.

Why would anyone ignore this seemingly compelling evidence?

Values: How you interpret the data depends on the questions you ask.. I want to know, “How can we ensure equitable educational outcomes so that every student develops the values, capacities, and expertise to have a

Education reformers in the fog of their own market-based ideologies seem to lack the insight

productive personal, work, and citizen life.” Many reformers accept inequality as a fact of life and are therefore content to make improvements for a few. So, the road choice is really about values.

or courage to change course even as contradictory evidence mounts.

Self-interest: Some folks just want to make money, and schools are only another market in which to invest. As in other sectors of the economy, such as banking, many investors want as few impediments and as many advantages as possible. In that framework, competition, for-profit schools, high-profit-margin technologies, unregulated markets, and low-cost, nonunionized employees are a means to that end. Evidence is irrelevant. Profit trumps product quality.

Resonance: In the U.S., we struggle to resolve conflicts between individual vs. collective responsibility, autonomy vs. control notions, and fixed vs. growth theories of intelligence in social and economic policies. These foundational ideas rarely surface to illuminate education policy debates. As a result, we tend to fall back on whichever side of these unstated dichotomies have the most resonance, power, and influence behind them.

Fog: Robert McNamara reflected in the documentary, “The Fog of War,” that Cold War ideological blinders prevented Vietnam War planners from changing course even when evidence mounted that their policies were doomed. Similarly, education reformers in the fog of their own market-based ideologies seem to lack the insight or courage to change course even as contradictory evidence mounts.

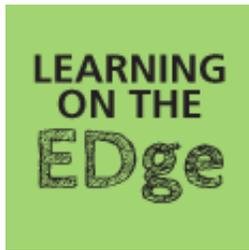
One bright spot is that resistance is growing, but I worry that, in the process, standards, standardization, and consequential testing are being conflated in unproductive ways. The values arbiter of our educational road choices still remains whether we want improvement for all or just a few.

Tags: [education policy](#)

About Arthur Camins

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