

Education reform and the corrosion of community responsibility

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: February 26 at 6:00 am

The law of unintended consequences essentially states that individual and government actions always have some unintended consequences. In the following post, Arthur H. Camins writes about the unintended consequences of many education reform policies. Camins is the director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J. The ideas expressed in this article are his alone and do not represent Stevens Institute. His other writing can be found at www.arthurcamins.com.

By Arthur H. Camins

The ways in which we think and talk about education are changing — and not for the better.

While current education reform policies have [demoralized educators](#) — because their professionalism and integrity are under attack — as well as parents — whose neighborhood schools are closing and children are being over-tested — there is a more subtle and harder-to-resist process under way.

Acceptance of the ideas behind [charter schools](#), [performance-based teacher salary differentiation](#) and diminishment of teachers' collective bargaining rights is having a morally corrosive effect on our society. These are destructive policies choices, not just because they are ineffective and contraindicated by available evidence, but more important because they undermine the fundamental moral principle of community responsibility.

The famous quote attributed to the ancient Rabbi Hillel provides a worthy moral compass:

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?” [Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14]

Extending the educational choices, currently available to the wealthy, to the poor has become one of the principal arguments for charter school expansion. This rationale for increasing public investment in charter schools fails the test of morality. Disturbingly, it has permeated popular thinking, promoting false hopes, while maintaining the very privileges its supporters disingenuously or illogically claim to mediate.

We all make small moral choices every day in which we decide whether to be out only for ourselves or consider and act to support the well being of others. When we are bone tired, do we give up our seat on a crowded train for the elderly or handicapped? Do we advocate for programs that increase our own taxes to support the needs of the less well off? Do we

use special influence to induce principals to assign our children to the teacher with the best reputation, knowing that our own child's gain is another's loss? Do we approve of school assignment boundaries that segregate based on race or socioeconomic status or alternatively those that encourage integration? Do we endorse policies such as tracking that advantage some children to the detriment of others?

Each of these moral decisions turns on how we understand the interdependence of our own well being and that of our close circle of family and friends with the needs of the larger community. Charter schools are promoted not just as laboratories for innovation freed from bureaucratic constraints, but rather as choices for individuals in opposition to dysfunctional public schools. This has broad appeal because as a nation we have yet to substantively or systemically mediate educational inequity. However, even the strongest advocates accept that charter schools will vary in effectiveness. Their idea is that successful schools will win the competition for students and thrive, while others will wither and close. However, this strategy is in itself inequitable because the disruptive effect of school closings negatively impacts students in already unstable communities, but not those in stable middle class or wealthy communities.

I do not expect any parent – given the choice between sending their child to an orderly successful school and one that is not — to choose the latter. On an individual level, such a choice fails the *If I am not for myself* precept. However, government advocacy for a public system of choice based on the explicit idea that schools differ not just in educational emphasis, but in quality, fails the *If I am only for me* moral principle. This raises the impact of choosing one's own well-being over that of others from an ethically questionable personal decision to a fixed society-wide norm. In doing so, it shifts the improvement focus from a shared concern or common struggle about the community's children to individual parents making self-interested selections for their own children.

The wealthy have always had such choices for their children. They have the flexibility to move to neighborhoods without the educational challenges that come with poor neighborhoods. With enough money the wealthy can also opt out of public schools and pay for select private schools with enormous resources advantages. However, it is the very exclusion of others from their communities and schools that make these choices attractive to the wealthy. Schools that serve the privileged have the freedom to offer children a wide array of enrichments without the pressures of reading and mathematics test score attainment that are imposed on schools attended by the poor.

In fact, perception of differential school quality has been a major force for mobility and neighborhood segregation. While it is well known that low-income students experience greater educational attainment in small classes in economically and racially mixed schools, we do not hear calls from wealthy charter school supporters to open up the schools their children attend to others. Wealth-based access to high-quality education is not a natural function, but instead a product of policy choices that permit income disparity and geographic isolation to determine educational opportunity.

We could, for example, fund schools, not from tax dollars that are determined by widely divergent local wealth and property values, but instead from progressive income taxes or increased taxes on capital gains and corporate profits. Lawmakers choose to not do so. We could incentivize community planning boards to support mixed income housing, while providing disincentives for exclusionary residential zoning laws. We could provide more public support so that housing insecurity and the resultant family mobility ceases to be a

negative contributor to some students' readiness to learn. We could provide sufficient funding for the small-class sizes and teacher professional development that enable the individual attention required for successful diverse classrooms in which students learn with and about one another.

Unfortunately, the "choices" made by elected officials have frequently prioritized wealth accumulation and privilege over educational equity. These policies fail the *If I am only for me* precept.

There is no substantial evidence that either for-profit or non-profit charter schools vary any less in quality than current community-governed public schools. By shifting authority over schools from communities to independent charter boards, parents' voices are diminished. Therefore, widespread acceptance of the idea that way for the poor to ensure their children's future is to make a personal choice to send their own child to a charter school rather than their neighborhood school undermines the impetus for social action to ensure the future of all of the community's children. It promotes self-interest over social responsibility as a human value.

Current education policies demand differentiated pay scales for individual teachers, based in significant measure on their contribution to the test-score growth of their students. However, there is no absolute standard or criteria for expected growth. Instead, scores are a function of the natural normative distribution of student growth. Therefore, individual teachers gain only in comparison to others. Individuals are rewarded when they theoretically contribute more to student growth than others. As a result, there must be winners and losers with competition instead of collaboration hard wired into the system. These "value-added metrics" have been severely criticized by respected psychometricians as inaccurate and unstable. However, the broader moral problem is that they elevate "me" and exclude the "we." Once again, since there is no evidence that financial rewards result in improved teaching or better student outcomes, this policy promotes individual concern at the expense of collaboration for community improvement.

Collective bargaining is based on the idea that individual workers benefit when they join together to support one another. Historically, unions arose because individuals found that they had greater power to gain decent pay, benefits and job protections together than alone. In many ways the stability of a middle-class life is directly related to whether workers in both the public and private sectors are looking out for one another through collective action instead of being left on their own. I do not defend every decision of every union. Sometimes unions have made bad decisions as they balanced the interests of their members with those of the larger community. However, it is not just bad decisions that are under assault, but rather the very idea of collective action. When the societal norm shifts to *I am only for myself*, then we need to ask: "Who are we? Is this who we want to be?"

Individualism and community concern have always been in tension in the United States. The rise of unions, the civil rights and feminist movements between the 1930's and the early 1970's may represent our historical zenith for valuing we over me. The actual gains

these movements wrought were the product of compromises, but still driven by people who saw their futures bound up with that of others.

The outlines of a society-wide shift in our moral identity have been emerging for some time— at least since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. However, the recent push for self-directed rather than community-focused government policies in public education— from “school choice” to individual performance pay to undermining collective bargaining— strikes me as an especially egregious violation of Rabbi Hillel’s moral principle. Self-concern is a rationale moral choice only in the context of a society that refuses to systemically address inequity and only if everyone becomes convinced that collective action is a hopelessly naïve moral and strategic principle. History and morality suggest otherwise.

We need to call upon one another as individuals and as society to make conscious choices about which moral compass guides our actions. To me, the choice is clear. We need to stop de-moralizing and start re-moralizing education policy. It’s time. “If not now, when?”

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