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Education Reform: Unsubstantiated Benefit Claims; Unreported Side Effects

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Would the Food and Drug Administration permit a pharmaceutical company to target marketing of a drug to poor communities with claims of helpfulness for everyone, when it knew ahead of time that it could only help a few and without advertising known negative side effects? Of course, not. The use, sale and marketing of pharmaceuticals is regulated, if imperfectly, by the FDA. However, no such regulations constrain the claims of education reformers or their ability to market and implement their preferred strategies at scale. Drugs must proceed through extensive rigorous testing and peer review to substantiate claims before availability on the open market is permitted. Advertisements of benefits must be accompanied by information about known potential negative side-effects. We would all be better off if the same constraints applied to education policy and marketing. Then, at least the public could weigh real potential benefits and side effects and make more informed judgments about the policies they want.

We are in a marketing war for the soul of American education. We are at risk of a radical change in which protecting the rights of the few trumps ensuring the common good and in which democratic participation gives way to private governance.

These battles are raging in the open, but the public is observing the conflagration through the fog of war. Whenever that happens, evidence and the common good are the casualties and self-interested ideology is the winner.

Robert MacNamara used the term [fog of war](#) to describe the purposeful self-delusion that prevented Vietnam-era policy makers from coming to grips with the real forces at play. Death, destruction and loss of confidence in government were the results. [Supporters of current education reform policies operate in such a fog](#), but like advertisers they employ a fog machine that obscures public understanding through purposeful marketing. Drug marketers successfully distract wary customers' attention away from deleterious side effects behind images of healthy patients prancing through fields of flowers and smiling families. Similarly, supporters of a market driven education system tell compelling stories of improvement and egregious examples of incompetence. However, they are free to make

unsubstantiated claims and hide the side effects of their favored improvement measures because no law requires truth in education marketing.

In this environment, it is not surprising that while conflictual issues are front and center for educators and policy makers, the general public may wonder why supporters and opponents all claim to want improvement, but still hold widely divergent views.

We need some clarity. We need to burn away the fog so the public can decide.

Defenders of current education policies would have us believe that opponents are either right wing extremists who just hate anything that President Obama wants (There is substantial truth to this claim) or union-driven defenders of adult privilege in a terrible status quo. As a result, supporters of equitable democratic education are understandably on the defensive, trying to keep classrooms from being overrun by test preparation, trying to hold on to teachers' due process and collective bargaining rights, seeking to protect the already meager state and federal contribution to local education funding, and fighting to oppose school closings. However, supporters of a radical shift in public education to a market-based competitive system have been successful in portraying these necessarily defensive moves as being against any improvements.

One weapon in the arsenal of opponents of current policies has been to point out the absence of evidentiary support. In fact, there is no system inside the U.S. or around the world that has made substantial systemic progress through charter schools, merit pay or test-driven accountability. Resistance is growing, but so far this line of attack has not built enough widespread public understanding to deter policy makers. Maybe that is because the supporters of these policies have effectively obscured their real goals and values.

Revealing two central value issues may help clear the fog. Then, let's report the evidence and side effects so the public can decide:

First, let's look at whether education policies prioritize individual advancement over the common good. This is not a new divide. Individualism and social responsibility have been in tension throughout U.S. history. Next, let's examine whether policies demonstrate trust in democratic governance. Again, the trust the self-appointed experts v. trust the people divide is not new. What determines which perspective is ascendant at a policy level is who has influence and how they define their interests. When the public is foggy, the interests of the few always win. We need to turn this around.

Belief in Individualism

Supporters of current education reform measures prioritize individual advancement over the common good. As a result, their policies have detrimental side effects. Current policies tolerate varying levels of inequity and promote individualism as the motivator for improvement. Here are a few examples among many.

(1) The majority of school funding comes from local tax revenues, which are determined by widely divergent local income and property wealth. The side effect is that variation in teachers' salaries and resources confer additional benefits to those children whose parents

are already privileged. One solution would be to take more money from the wealthy in taxes, but this redistribution is portrayed as a negative constraint on some individuals.

Let's report the evidence and side effects so the public can decide: What is more important, protecting the wealth of a few individuals or ensuring equitable school funding for all?

(2) The currently popular justification for charter schools is that individual parents have a "right to choose" among schools of varying quality. There is no evidence that charter schools confer benefits on remaining schools or that all charter systems are superior. However, there are strong indicators of negative side effects. There is abundant evidence that in the absence of substantial increases in education funding, every tax dollar that funds a charter school means less money for the remaining schools. The expansion of charter schools is increasing racial and socioeconomic isolation, while evidence suggests that integrated schools promote stronger academic gains and preparation for diverse work environments. Supporters dismiss these criticisms, putting greater value on the education of some than the wellbeing of all.

Let's report the evidence and side effects so the public can decide: Which is a better public investment, the chance that charter schools might confer benefits on some children or working to improve all schools?

(3) Supporters of merit pay for teachers believe that competition among individual teachers for increased salaries based on student test scores will motivate better teaching despite evidence to the contrary across multiple fields. Their belief in individual financial motivation is so strong that they ignore the negative side effects. Competition undermines collaboration among teachers for the common good. New teacher evaluation systems are focused on measuring individual teachers based on easily measured student knowledge. These measures are notoriously inaccurate. In addition, teachers are discouraged from attending to the broader hard-to-measure purposes of education. Teachers want to demonstrate care for students, but instead must attend to care about test scores.

Let's report the evidence and side effects so the public can decide: When do you do your best work? When you are threatened and must compete with or your colleagues or when you collaborate? Which strategy do you want to prevail in your child's school, competition or collaboration? Are you willing to sacrifice care for improved test scores?

(4) Supporters of market driven competition among schools for students and among parents for entry into schools of varying quality do not mind that such an arrangement inevitably leads to opening and closing of schools and disruption of the lives of some children. Their priority on individual winners trumps concern for the lives of many.

Let's report the evidence and side effects so the public can decide: Where do you place your bet? Do you want a system in which some children may get a chance to attend a school where they may get a better education or one that seeks to improve the education of all?

Distrust of the Public

Distrust of democratic governance in education has appeared in three forms: state take over of local school districts, mayoral appointment of school boards, rather than direct election; and, control of schools by for-profit and not-for-profit boards that are not elected or

answerable to either parents or the communities that schools serve. Supporters of these measures, in varying degrees, make an implicit argument: We tried democracy, and it did not work. The public cannot be trusted to make good decisions about education.

Stories of dysfunctional, conflict-plagued, private agenda-driven local school boards abound. There are countless examples school boards making uniformed decisions that do not serve the interests of children. However, privatization and shrinking of public participation in decision-making is not an antidote to ineffective, uninformed democracy. Public knowledge and clear-eyed evidence are. History is replete with evidence that the side effect of disenfranchisement in the name of improvement is benefits to the few and disaster for the many. Arguments that restricting democracy will benefit everyone have always been the coins of autocrats and self-appointed experts driven by blind faith or ideology and narrow self-interest.

The drive to privatize educational governance, especially with respect to expansion of charter schools, has two unstated goals. One is to open up the vast education market to individuals looking for a new profitable place to invest their capital. Another is more cynical. Some people have given up hope for systemic improvement. Instead, they are willing to settle for a system that only provides an opportunity for those they deem to be the deserving and capable few among the unfortunate many. Hence, the negative disruptive side effects of school closings in poor communities are the price that the many will pay to save the lucky few.

Let's report the evidence and side effects so the public can decide: Which side are you on? Are you willing to give up your right to democratic participation and risk the future of your child or your neighbor's to privilege the lucky few? Are you ready to give up on the common good?

For the sake of clarity, I've attempted to present complex issues in binary terms. Assuredly, there are gradations. In reality, ensuring the wellbeing of individuals is inseparable from advancing the common good. The old labor slogan, an injury to one is an injury to all, said it simply, but well. Put another way, my personal gain is diminished or even negated when it comes at the expense of another.

We need an educational system based on these values. I think, when asked, the public may agree.

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