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The Better Way to Improve Education: Invest and Trust

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Current debate about education policy is dominated by several zombie ideas. One idea that should have been dead, but keeps coming back to life is the "**government is the problem**"-inspired commitment to public disinvestment. The other better left for idea is to distrust educators, but trust tests and markets to improve education. There is a better, third way to improve education: invest and trust.

Some in congress appear determined to abandon any federal role in ensuring equity or quality in education by cutting funds, supporting portability of federal education funds to public or charter schools and underspecifying use of funds through block grants to states. Put into action, these policies will reinvigorate and perpetuate the ugly history of opposing equity under the guise of local control.

Others legislators remain enamored with destructive, evidence-free ideas: Test-driven accountability, competition between public and charter schools, and rewards and sanctions will force teachers and schools to "**step up their game**," and produce more equitable student performance.

The Better, Third Way

One feature of a better invest and trust improvement strategy is what education scholars Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves call investing in **professional capital**. That means investing in developing the professional capacity and expertise of the people who teach and operate schools. It also means investing in developing leaders who support success through vision and support, creating learning organizations rather than hierarchical monitoring and compliance regimes.

Another feature of the invest and trust option is to provide support to children and their families to optimize readiness to learn. It also means trusting and encouraging people to participate in the decisions that effect their lives.

Unlike old school, top-down strategies like firing the bottom 10 percent of employees, invest and trust is not a prescriptive recipe for improvement in education. Modern management research and practice indicate that invest and trust is what any successful organization does. Research indicates investment and trust move organizations beyond the status quo. It is a better way to improve than threatening, blaming or abandoning the people who must do the hard work of improvement.

Identifying value-driven goals and what needs to change are the starting points for a better way to improve education. Democracy, opportunity, and shared responsibility are core, if sometimes contested, and not yet realized, aspirational American values. We need a society in which there is not just more equal opportunity, but more lived equity. Schools can play a part to realize these values and goals, but not alone.

We need better democracy, not more external control.

Education can advance individual wellbeing, but it also has shared social benefits. That means that its purpose, structure and quality should be democratically decided. A market driven system in which unelected charter boards or private schools are vested with decision-making powers violates this core democratic value. Therefore, while many elected school boards do not function well or responsively, we should invest to improve them not eliminate them. Trusting in an imperfect democracy is a far better option than the slippery slope of selective authoritarianism or the anarchy of leaving everyone to compete in a "buyer beware" free-choice school marketplace.

Critical thinking and broad knowledge are essential features of democracy. Test-based accountability has shifted the focus of school to test performance and **diverted attention from science**, social studies, and the arts. This diversion undermines the broad, deep knowledge that is critical for informed democratic participation, leaving our society vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. A better option is an inclusive education focused on **learning for life, work and citizenship** that cultivates learning for both personal growth and social contribution.

Without participation, there is no democracy. Autocracy is dysfunctional, not just in high-level governance, but in the day-to-day operations of organizations. In education, autocracy manifests itself in over-specified standards, scripted lessons and draconian externally imposed evaluation regimes. These interfere with the development of the professional judgment and autonomy required to address the complex, diverse needs of students. A better way is to provide teachers, like other professionals, the autonomy they need to do their best with meaningful review and feedback from their professional colleagues to support continuous professional growth.

Blame-based accountability and competition for rewards causes teachers to close their doors and work alone. Working alone is old school. A better way is to provide time and encouragement for collaboration so that teachers can share expertise and responsibility for the learning of all students.

We need more opportunity for equity, not opportunity to win.

Opportunity is another core American value, but it has a split personality. One version of opportunity preserves inequity, and the other expands equity. The preservationist idea is equal opportunity: Provide a fair shot to get ahead within the current socio-economic structure. This ideal notion of a perfect meritocracy ignores the reality that everyday lived inequity makes equal opportunity illusory. The most talented teachers led by the most capable principals may **take the edge off opportunity differences**. However, it cannot erase opportunity inequity for a significant percentage of students who experience lived inequity every day. The competitive version of opportunity is as meager as it is callous, accepting the adage, "The poor will always be with us."

Nobel Prize economist, **Paul Krugman, recently argued** that while high-quality education should be available and affordable for all, it is the unequal distribution of power that perpetuates inequality and lack of economic opportunity. Unequal power distribution is a political choice. At best, lottery-based admission to those charter schools that are high-performing gives a few children a chance to get ahead (albeit while **leaving others behind**). A strong education increases an individual's chance of getting a better paying job in a competitive market but it does not eliminate the low wage job. A narrow view of opportunity focuses on individual betterment, while a broader aspirational view focuses on reducing overall inequity. A better option is to reduce overall inequity through investment in more jobs at living wages, adequate housing, universal health care, and preschool education.

We need more shared responsibility, not protection of privilege.

There are many reasons that the most powerful variable in explaining divergence in student outcomes is socio-economic status.

One significant contributor to disparate achievement is the inequality of resources that results from funding schools through divergent local property taxes bases. Few politicians seem willing to challenge this system that preserves the privileges of the already advantaged. A better option is shared responsibility. Children go to school locally, but the benefits of education are societal. General state and federal tax revenues should be distributed so that those who need the most get the most, while reducing or eliminating local property tax burdens in low-wealth communities.

Another contributor to inequity in education is growing **racial and socioeconomic isolation** that undermines the academic and cross-cultural learning that supports a civically and economically vibrant society. Private school vouchers and charter

schools tend to exacerbate this isolation problem, drawing funds away from remaining public schools and promoting the value that education is about individual choice, not **social responsibility**. A better option is to support school and housing integration and invest in the schools we already have.

More diverse schools would be a huge step forward but would not ensure equal opportunity for academic and social learning. Students' readiness to learn is influenced by myriad out-of-school factors. So-called ability-based class assignment mechanisms often separate students within schools, reproducing geographic isolation and preserving privilege. Better options include smaller inclusive classrooms, support programs for students who struggle academically, explicit programs to support **social and emotional learning**, and more actively engaging learning environments.

Investing in education improvement will require a reordering of our nation's priorities toward equity. Developing trust will require a shift away from assessment for compliance monitoring and blame to **assessment that provides useful information** for improvement using the right tools for the right purpose.

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