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Why Students in Some Countries Do Better

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Why Students in Some Countries Do Better

Ludger Woessman

“Why Do Students in Some Countries Do Better?” Other countries usually have a national ministry of education that sets forth uniform education goals and standards, but not here. Our Constitution leaves authority over schools to the states, which delegate much authority to local school districts, which leave much discretion to principals and teachers. This local control makes for great diversity in student learning, but students who move from one school to another often lack the knowledge necessary for success in their new schools.

Our system is distinctive in other ways that handicap efficiency. Ludger Woessmann of the Kiel Institute of World Economics reported the largest study of educational efficiency ever conducted. His analysis of thirty-nine countries showed what fostered high achievement:

- close attention to test results,
- school control over staff and operations,
- teacher discretion over teaching methods, and
- competition from private schools.

The influence of teacher unions on curriculum had negative effects. And surprisingly, spending made no difference!

So now we know much of why the U.S. stands out with high costs but poor student progress during the school years.

In his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith suggested that “division of labor” promotes efficiency. In many efficient organizations, three groups divide their efforts: external boards establish their distinctive mission, set goals, and measure progress; responsible and responsive to boards, management hires staff and directs operations; staff members hardly invent their own idiosyncratic goals but concentrate on carrying out their responsibilities to attain board goals. Sustained failure of any one of these three groups at their respective tasks means the organization fails.

Nearly the opposite is true of the U.S. public school system. No goal seems too remote from academic learning to adopt; no “stakeholder” too removed from having a say about the mission and goals. State and local school boards fail to set clear goals and measure progress. And they tend to interfere with school management.

Teachers, principals, boards, and national interest groups compete to set priorities and control teaching. Yet when everyone is responsible, no one is responsible, and having twenty-three priorities means having none. Contention, noise, and fads prevail. In the end, teachers cannot depend on what their students were previously taught. Boards, leaders, and staff all overreach, and yet each group tends to fail at its distinctive task. A thousand flowers bloom but do not a garden make.

Other countries provide much better accountability. While making goals clear, they allow parental choice of privately and publicly governed schools, both publicly financed. Competition encourages educators to identify the best practices and helps parents choose the best schools. We spend public funds only on public schools, which limits most parents to the beggar’s choice of only a single school, which has little incentive to improve since its customers have nowhere else to go.

The answers to these problems are easy as one, two, three:

1. measurement and accountability for results,
2. public support of schools that compete with one another, and
3. parental choice of schools.

[This Briefing is digested from an essay by Herbert J. Walberg, Ph.D., University Scholar, University of Illinois-Chicago. It was published May 7, 2001 as a Hoover Institution Weekly Essay, copyright Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University,

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