
ON EDUCATION REDESIGN

Fixing Schools vs. Fixing School Systems?

an op-ed

By Walter McClure

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In his article *What an Ordinary Public School Can Do* (NYTimes 4/02/17, Sunday Review, p.2; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/01/opinion/sunday/who-needs-charters-when-you-have-public-schools-like-these.html>) education professor David Kirp complains that new Education Secretary Betsy DeVos dismisses public schools as too slow and difficult to reform, calling for supposedly nimbler charters and vouchers. In rebuttal he presents the superb example of the Union Public School District in a low income, high minority area of Tulsa, where its public schools and students are performing well above the national average, on a budget well below, by steady vision, innovation, and dedication.

But I am hesitant of the ideas of both Prof. Kirp and the Secretary. Their thinking, is focused simply on the school, Prof. Kirp on better public schools, and Sec. DeVos on new, presumably better schools. But the problem of education is not the *school*, it is the *school system*. What neither seems to be thinking about is a new and better public school system.

Prof. Kirp rightfully praises the shining example of Union. But he doesn't ask why he has to go so far to find another exemplar, citing a few in other scattered states. He doesn't ask why if Union is so wonderful – and it is – why can't he go next door and find school districts equally wonderful. But few are even close. Why isn't every district in Tulsa, in Oklahoma, in the United States, emulating and improving on the pioneering work of Union and all the other all too rare innovative public school districts he mentions. His article were better titled, *What an Ordinary Public School Can Do but Most Don't*. And he doesn't think to raise the question why don't they, let alone try to answer it.

Sec. DeVos seems equally oblivious that the problem is not a new, better school, it is a new better school system. She will have to look equally far and wide to find the nimble charter schools she talks of – they are certainly out there – performing and innovating quite as brilliantly as Union. There are superb chartered public schools and superb district public schools both. But they are so uncommon. And there's your \$64 billion question: why?

When you see the great majority of organizations in some large system, like public education or health care and so forth, performing poorly on important goals, don't ask what's wrong with the organizations, ask what's wrong with the system. Ask do the

structure and incentives of that system enable and reward the organizations for the desired performance or frustrate them. Ask, for example in education, when children in a public school district aren't learning, who loses their job, who goes out of business. No one. It's a monopoly, and monopolies, public or private, eventually serve themselves, not their mission. That's why good schools don't multiply and bad schools don't go out of business. The structure and incentives of the larger system in which public schools operate are wrong.

So the idea of adding chartered public schools to district public schools was to broaden the public school system ... to break the monopoly and introduce choice and competition, a new kind of public market. I emphasize, in the original "Public School Choice" strategy that introduced this idea (developed by Ted Kolderie and his colleagues at the Center for Policy Design, and since distorted by every special interest that can claw its way into a Statehouse), *charters are specifically public schools*, meeting all requirements of a public school, chartered directly by the State rather than a district, and free to operate in competition for students with district public schools. They are not private, they are not for-profit, and they are not religious ... all bad ideas in a public school system.

The goal is not charter schools, it is good schools. The idea is not that one type is superior to the other. The idea is that good district public schools and good charter public schools will draw students from bad district public schools and bad charter public schools. And good schools will grow and bad schools will go out of business. All public schools, district and charter, will steadily improve because the redesigned, broadened public school system now has structure and incentives that enable and reward schools when children learn, and disciplines them when they don't.

The only nimbleness of a charter school is that they can innovate without going through layers and layers of district bureaucracy who have no incentive to change. That only says they can be nimble, not that they will be (just as Prof. Kirp demonstrates only that district schools can be nimble, not that they will be). What will make them nimble is the presence of district schools and other charters, and they must demonstrate some advantage over these other schools if they hope to draw students from them. And if districts start losing students to charter public schools, suddenly the district bureaucracy will have a powerful new incentive, totally absent hitherto, to innovate back. (But presently ...surprise, surprise... most district bureaucracies are devoting their efforts to outlaw charter public schools rather than out-innovate them. School district boards take note; recruit good innovative charters to your district.)

There is no end of great ideas among teachers and educators. It is simply that most are stymied by complacent layers of a district bureaucracy with every incentive not to rock

the boat. A core idea of the Public School Choice strategy is that a group of innovative educators and teachers with a better idea ...like the original pioneering educators at Union... but stymied by district inertia as most are, could end-run the district bureaucracy by opening a charter and draw students. If successful, the district would have to start innovating back.

On the other hand, opening the floodgates of the public school system to for-profit and religious schools is a terrible idea pursued only by special interests greedy for taxpayer money, and *voted down in every referendum where put to the voters*. For-profit competitors are excellent in markets whose products have tangible quality readily apparent to consumers and payers. But they are dangerous in a market of products whose quality is soft and not readily clear, where it is too easy to fleece consumers and taxpayers. Nowhere has this been demonstrated more clearly than in education, where the government is finally cracking down on the all too often scandalous performance and profiteering by for-profit schools. It is open question enough that for-profit schools compete in the private school market, but they should absolutely be excluded from the public school system and taxpayer money.

Likewise, both government and religious officials should beware allowing religious schools into the taxpayer-funded public school system. The last thing religious officials should want is public bureaucrats dictating what is permissible in their curriculum, and the last thing any citizen should want is allow any public official to decide which religions do or don't get taxpayer money ... for anything, let alone for publically supported proselytizing. Separation of church and state, as well as the best interests of both, demand religious schools be excluded from the public school system and taxpayer money.

So I suggest what is needed is a better, redesigned and broadened, *public-only* school system, with no conflicting interests of profit and religion, where parent choice among various district and chartered public schools gives all public schools potent incentive to improve. Then they will all be looking for the kinds of devoutly to be desired advances Prof. Kirp waxes so eloquent about, and do them in their own self-interest without having to have State and Federal overseers alternately cajoling and browbeating them. Improving public *schools* has been tried for fifty years with indifferent success. It is time to try improving public school *systems*. ■

About the author: Dr. Walter McClure, Ph.D., is chair and a senior fellow of the Center for Policy Design.

About the Center: The Center for Policy Design is a non-profit, non-partisan policy research and design organization based in Saint Paul, Minnesota and working nationally, that using the theory and methods of Large System Architecture develops and helps policymakers apply system redesign strategies for health care, public education, and other large systems in need of improved performance. [website: centerforpolicy.org]



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