FEATURE RESPONSE

THINKING ABOUT POLICY ISSUES: SOME REFLECTIONS

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There are eleven ways I see education policy differently from the general public, legislators, and policy makers.

First, I prefer reasonable evidence that a policy is likely to be needed, or work, as opposed to making decisions about policy based on persuasive stories, folk beliefs, and half-truths. For example, homework and retention in grade (or “flunking”) policies are just two examples of American education practices that are usually at odds with existing research. And NCLB is an example of a policy that was predicted not to work as intended, and indeed it did not.

Second, I think about over commitment, as when Goals 2000 assured the public that we would be #1 in math and science by the year 2000. Or, that NCLB would have every student proficient by 2014. These were irrational goals put forth by foolish politicians who knew quite well that they would not be on duty when those goals were not reached. But support of these ridiculous goals made the jobs of school administrators and teachers harder, pressured them into gaming and cheating, and helped to undermine the public’s faith in our nation’s schools.

Third, if policies have high-stakes attached to them, such as consequences that reward or punish teachers and administrators by providing bonuses or firing them, they will promote gaming the system, at the least, and provide incentives for cheating as well. Moreover, punitive policies often undermine the intrinsic motivation that drives many educators to succeed. So these policies may be more harmful and less helpful than they appear to legislators, school boards, and the general public.

Fourth, American policy makers favor policies that appear to have simple main effects. They like to think that if they promote A for all students, then B will occur. They are ignorant of, or ignore, the complexity of the real world, a world where interactions abound. It might be that “If A then B” holds only when W is present, and A does not produce B under circumstances where X and Y are present. And even more of a problem is that when Z is present A may affect B negatively! Simple policies for a complex world rarely succeed, as is true of the accountability system promoted in Race to the Top and NCLB.

Fifth, policies are often promoted with costs hidden from the legislators and the public. The policies to promote the Common Core are now producing a windfall for
technology and testing companies, since all assessments will be online and the costs to have those systems in place and working will be in the billions of dollars. The hedge fund backers of charter schools seem oblivious to the fact that many charter schools claiming amazing achievements have been spending many more dollars per year on their students than is true of traditional public schools. Moreover, legislators and the public ignore the fact that tuition tax credit policies to support private schools substantially reduce the state funding needed for all other obligations of the state—police and fire protection, the courts, roads and bridges, and of course, the public education system.

Sixth, even when a program or policy seems successful, and is promoted by politicians, they have no idea how hard it is to have what works in one place, work in another place. It is difficult to transfer successful programs and difficult to scale up small programs that appear to work in the greenhouse, as it were. The evidence is overwhelming that many successful reading, science, or math programs simply do not replicate at other sites. Without studying those apparently successful programs in greater depth, the chances of moving them elsewhere are diminished. The impatience of politicians, new boards of education, or new superintendents to put into place a seemingly successful program needs to be tempered by the fact that local sensibilities need to be taken into account and local adaptations of the program or policy are likely to be needed.

Seventh, and related to the issue of transferring policies from one place to another, is the issue of policy made by exception. This is the case where an exception to a rule becomes a policy and subsequent attempts to work with that policy fail. The current best example of this is the cry by some that “poverty is no excuse for school failure.” Occasionally, children overcome the hardships of an upbringing in poverty, and an occasional school overcomes the intense poverty of the families they serve. These are exceptions, but the rule is unchanged: Family poverty limits a child’s chances of doing well in school, and neighborhood poverty rates strongly predict a school’s performance. Exceptions to rules abound, as when a cigarette smoker or heavy drinker lives to age 95. But the policy should not be changed by these exceptions. Policies attempting to curb smoking and drinking are not abandoned because exceptions exist. The slogan that “poverty is no excuse” attempts to influence policy by pointing to exceptions, but it now has become an excuse to do nothing about poverty!

Eighth, related to the need for indigenous buy-in of new policies and programs by educators is the need to hold off summative evaluations until a program has had time to take root. Formative evaluations of policies and programs should be the rule for a year or two, before a summative evaluation is attempted and judgments about a program’s success or failure made.

Ninth, we now know that the likelihood is quite small of ever obtaining unambiguous data from a summative evaluation, even one that found a way to use a randomized clinical trial (RCT) to assess the effects of a program or policy. Politicians want surety. I do not believe education (the social world) or medicine (the biological world) ever produces the surety that politicians hunger for, such as that which characterizes the physical world. The findings from some of the RCTs promoted by the federal government showed statistically significant effects for treatment A over treatment B. But the differences were often remarkably small. So in the hands of a talented teacher or a highly committed teacher, the treatment found to be ineffective appears to work just fine. And in the hands of a skeptical teacher, or a less talented one, the treatment or policy supported by the statistics from the RCT do not work. The social sciences cannot provide legislators making policy with the surety that they seek.
Tenth, I worry about imposing overly standardized approaches on teachers. Suppose a teacher is good at teaching, say, *Moby Dick* as an example of a great nineteenth-century American novel. But the standards adopted and the curriculum designed ends up recommending *The Red Badge of Courage*, or *Treasure Island*, or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or *The Scarlet Letter*, or a dozen other books thought to be grade-level appropriate. If we force that teacher to teach something they do not care deeply about and in which they have no great interest, we lose something wonderful. Teachers should have the right to meet the intent of a policy, say to teach about American nineteenth-century life and beliefs, without being obliged to teach what some distant policy maker or curriculum committee has recommended. Teachers should be treated like professionals who are capable of making intelligent choices about curriculum. Politicians often treat policy for teachers much like they make law: “you will do this, and not that, or penalties will be imposed!” I prefer education policies that promote having teachers present things they know well and love to teach, rather than policies that force teachers to accommodate the wishes of a distant bureaucrat or curriculum developer.

Eleventh, I worry that policy makers are too often outcome-oriented, while too often ignoring inputs, and forgetting that there is a strong relationship between the two. To be focused on high school graduation, college attendance, job readiness, test scores, and the like is not wrong, but each of these outputs of the education system is strongly related to inputs to the education system, for example the poverty rates of the families and the neighborhood the school serves. Each of the valued outputs is also empirically related to preschool attendance rates, food insecurity, medical coverage for families, neighborhood drug use, teacher experience, teacher turnover at the school, funding for counselors and librarians and nurses at the school, and so forth. The past 20 years have seen us move almost exclusively to policies related to the outputs of the schools (the achievement gap) and to ignore many of the inputs to the schools (pursuing equal education opportunities for children). Outcome-oriented policies make it easier to blame teachers and administrators for purported student failures, and they are often cheaper to fund than the input variables that affect schooling. But if the problems of many students and schools are related to inputs, then almost all the output-oriented remedies will be a failure, as appears to be the case with NCLB, Race to the Top, and school closings by mayors in large cities. Failure is likely to be the case with the imposition of the Common Core, as well. If you increase the rigor and breadth of the outputs of the system, without concern for an increase in the quality of the lives led by the students who come into the system, you have a sure recipe for policy failure.

We now understand that politicians and policy makers gain their positions of influence through the manipulation of symbols. It has become commonplace, therefore, to discover that many of the acts of high-placed policy makers are mere symbolism. Laws and policies are too often put in place not as serious attempts to solve problems, but to placate constituents or gain political backing. This explains the vigor with which new policies are announced and the lack of interest in assessing their eventual consequences. It is on this point that many policy makers and I part company. I am both disappointed and incensed when we squander opportunity, time, and money on mere symbolic politics. We need the courage to face reality, assess what needs to be done, and accept genuine responsibility for improving our world when it does not work as we wish it to.