

Panel Discussion

THEORIES OF ACTION FOR EFFECTING EDUCATION REFORM

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This panel is meant to examine policies to improve educational outcomes, which I believe is everybody's objective. It is certainly what the country has been talking about for the last two decades, since it was declared *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. During this time we have had a lot of flailing about. We have tried a lot of things and have had a lot of false starts. There has been a great deal of activity, and we have done a lot of spending. We are still in the middle of this today. But we do not have much improved achievement to show for what we have been up to these past 19 years. You can find very spotty evidence, but earlier sessions have made clear that there is not a lot of conclusive evidence that learning outcomes have improved much.

Going forward, what should we do differently? I think it is useful to proceed with some kind of a theory of action, that is, some plausible notion of what we think is most apt to drive the improved results that we seek. Otherwise, we are bound for more flailing about. While it is a considerable over-simplification, I have found it useful to think in terms of four theories of action that I believe dominate the education-reform arena today. I think that two of these theories have some promise. Two of them do not, but we will nevertheless surely continue to use them. In the real world, we commonly find more than one of these theories operating at the same time in a given place. It gets very complicated when you start mixing and matching and coming up with hybrids. On the other hand, that is the real world, and I think we are probably going to discover at the end of the day that a hybrid will work better than any one of these strategies taken alone.

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Of the four theories that I think dominated the conference discussion, two operate chiefly within the familiar framework of educational institutional arrangements and professions. The other two are driven mostly from outside the familiar institutional arrangements, and they include most of what we have been talking about at this conference. These outer-driven strategies are highly behaviorist. They presume that if you push from outside the system, people inside the system will begin to behave differently. Because they are highly behaviorist, I assume that they will be especially appealing to economists, just as they are deeply repugnant to most educators, not including myself.

The first theory of action is the oldest, the most familiar, and it is barely a changed system or strategy—just trusting the system to do a better job with additional resources. The assumption is that the school board and the superintendent want to do better, know how to do better, and would successfully improve student achievement, if only they had the wherewithal. This theory leads to a wide variety of resource-based strategies, such as smaller classes, longer school days, new textbooks, more technology, and so on.

The second theory of action, highly popular within the education field, I call, “trust the experts.” The idea is that education experts, such as researchers, professors, gurus, and some of the people in this room, would know how to make the system work better, if only they had greater influence over it. Therefore, if we give them more influence, the results will improve. This seeks either to give more power to experts or to bring greater expertise to bear on what schools do. Examples of implementations of this strategy include installation in a school of a whole new comprehensive school design devised by somebody like Jim Comer, Mark Tucker, or Howard Gardner; or the introduction of math-education experts to retrain fourth-grade teachers in a school so they can do a better job of teaching math. Warren Simmons and his colleagues are much involved with some of these kinds of activities under the Annenberg aegis and have been doing quite a lot of this for the last decade or so.

The third theory, which had most of the discussion at this conference because it is the most visible reform strategy in America today, I would call, “trust the government.” It assumes that a state government, with a lot of “oomph” added by the federal government, will set standards, develop tests, and impose consequences on the education system, causing the people within the system to teach better, study harder, learn more, and so on. This strategy involves statewide academic standards and tests or assessments. If it is fully fledged, it also normally involves rewards and interventions or punishments, with the rewards going to those who meet the standards—be they students, schools, or educators—and with the interventions or punishments going to those who do not—to those who need to work harder or have their behavior changed in some way. You

might hold the child back, dock the teacher's pay, replace the superintendent, or do some other intervention, or many other interventions, as cataloged with great precision year by year in the No Child Left Behind Act. The theory is that the government will create what a colleague called a kind of exoskeleton around this soft body of the education system and will thus cause it to shape up in a way that it would not do on its own.

The fourth strategy is, of course, competition and choice. This strategy also comes from outside the system, but it comes from the customers, from the marketplace, from, as it were, the bottom up rather than the top down. The theory, familiar to economists and others, is that the system will improve if it has competition; efficiency, quality, productivity, and performance will improve if there are choices, diversity, and marketplace forces at work. Theoretically this strategy will not only benefit the kids who are directly served by these alternative arrangements—typically low-income kids who otherwise would be trapped in failing, urban school systems—but will also tone up the whole system by virtue of the competition that is brought to bear upon it. This theory leads to charter schools, to vouchers, and to a myriad of other arrangements that come under the heading of competition and choice.

My evaluation of these four theories is as follows. I have very little confidence in trusting the system to do more with additional resources. There are occasional fluky situations where that strategy works, especially if really inspired leadership exists at a state, a district, or even a school building level. But these cases are rare. I also do not have a lot of confidence in trusting the experts to fix the system, though often expertise is needed within or in combination with one of these other strategies, as was discussed by Ellen Guiney, among others. The question, however, is whom do you trust to have the leverage to make things change? The experts are not the answer to that question. I do have a fair amount of confidence in the exoskeleton, the government-based, standards-based approach. But it is extremely difficult to implement successfully: to get the standards right, to get the tests right, to get the consequences in place, and so on. I also have a fair degree of optimism about the competition system, but its politics are so gnarly that we have not even given it a proper test, let alone given it a full-fledged endorsement as a reform strategy.

So where do we end up? Probably the most interesting example in front of us is the charter school phenomenon, which is a hybrid of strategies three and four. Charter schools combine accountability, tests, and information on the one hand, with diversity, competition, pluralism, and choice on the other hand. With 2,400 charter schools, heading rapidly toward 3,000, we have the beginnings of a naturally occurring experiment at the intersection of strategies three and four, and one that incidentally draws in a lot of expertise. A good charter school often has some inspired educators working on some very interesting ideas. It is simultaneously

accountable both to the state for meeting the state standards as prescribed by the state test and to its customers. Because nobody has to attend them, charter schools will have no students—and no revenue—if nobody chooses to go to them.

Like Eric Hanushek, I would like to suggest that the standards-based, or government-driven, system and the market system might even need each other. Each of them by itself supplies a solution to the biggest problem besetting the other one. The market by itself lacks informed consumers, a problem that can be solved by government standards and tests. The government-driven accountability system is very good at identifying failing schools, but it is lousy at doing anything about them, for which the choice system may hold the solution. I have hopes about these two strategies working in combination as we go forward, and I think we are beginning to learn quite a lot about them from the charter school experience.

I used to assume that school inevitably meant a grown-up in a room with four walls and 20 little people. The most interesting thing that I am involved with right now, along with former education secretary Bill Bennett, is a private start-up called K-12 (K12.com) that is seeking to create a virtual school for the country and potentially for the world, with thousands of kids to be enrolled by September. When you begin to think through the implications of a virtual school, everything changes: the definition of a school, of a teacher, of a school day, of a learning environment, of what it means to be in third grade, and so on. I want to suggest that we might find ourselves, with the help of technology, actually catapulting over a lot of the institutional arrangements that have been so frustrating, exacerbating, and perplexing as we try to reform the system that we have today.