



POLICY BRIEF 11

THE CASE AGAINST “CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT” IN SCHOOLS

By: David C. Rose, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, Department of Economics and
PPRC Fellow

and

J. Martin Rochester, Ph.D.,
Curators Distinguished Teaching Professor, Department of Political Science

The absence of competition means there is little to induce schools to abandon reforms that do not actually improve performance.



8001 Natural Bridge Road
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499

FOR MORE INFORMATION

(314) 516.5273 TEL

(314) 516.5268 FAX

pprc@umsl.edu EMAIL

Policy makers are understandably sympathetic to the notion that government-provided services should be subjected to continuous review and improvement. The purpose of this policy brief is to make policy makers aware that when continuous improvement is institutionalized in public K-12 education, it can generate perverse incentives that lead to worse educational outcomes for students.

Reform is hardly new in American K-12 education. Education philosophy has been continuously reinventing itself over the last century. But recently both the pace of reform and the willingness of schools to adopt reforms have increased. This appears to be the result of a change in school management philosophy, which embraces the Total Quality Management (TQM) principle of *continuous improvement*. Put simply, this is the belief that business firms that fail to continuously improve are destined to fall behind their competitors.

Conventional economic analysis has shown that when markets are highly competitive, it is customers who are the ultimate beneficiaries of continuous improvement. This is because when a market is competitive, an innovation that increases a company's profit in the short-run leads to falling prices in the long-run as new firms that enter the market do so by employing the innovation and existing firms copy the innovation. Perhaps even more important, in competitive markets any innovation that proves to be a loser is quickly abandoned because failure to do so will likely result in bankruptcy. Competition insures that all firms must improve and that failed efforts to improve will be terminated immediately.

The problem is that American K-12 education is not a competitive market. The absence of competition means there is little to induce schools to abandon reforms that do not actually improve performance. Making matters worse, there is also an imbalance in incentives for involvement in policy development that results in the management principle of continuous improvement working to the detriment of the goal of high academic achievement.

AN IMBALANCE OF INCENTIVES

Broadly, the public K-12 policy process has three interested parties: the students, their parents, and the suppliers of educational services (teachers and administrators). Assume that parents are only concerned about their children's welfare, whereas suppliers of educational services are concerned about child welfare and their own welfare.

When parental input is sought in the formulation of new education policy, parents are grateful to contribute to the process of continuous improvement. But the longest a child will spend in most schools (that is, in any given building) is six years (K-5). After initial consideration, it normally takes at least a year for a new policy to be adopted and another year before it is actually implemented. After implementation, new policies take additional time to produce results because it takes students, teachers, and administrators time to adjust. The typical parent who sits on a curriculum or some other advisory committee therefore has, on average, only 3 years before his or her child leaves the school. This makes it highly unlikely that any policy a parent encounters on such a committee will actually affect the parent's child.

In contrast, a teacher/administrator can potentially spend over 40 years in a given school. While parents have to live with the consequences of new policies they dislike for, on average, about 1-2 years, educators have to live with the consequences of policies they dislike for decades. Teachers and administrators therefore have much more at stake in the policy process than parents. It follows that any policy that promotes the welfare of students but does so at the expense of teachers will be vigorously opposed by teacher groups, whose efforts will be well-coordinated because they have powerful incentives to mobilize. Similarly, any policy that promotes the welfare of teachers but does so at the expense of students will be opposed by parents, but this opposition will be neither vigorous nor well-organized because of the weak incentives they have to mobilize.

The political machinery needed to win policy battles is what economists call a sunk investment. Once in place, the additional cost of using it is nearly zero, so teachers and teacher groups tend to win most policy debates because opposition is comparatively feeble. As a result, even if policies are proposed at random, the distribution of policies that are actually adopted will be anything but random. The policy process will be biased against policies that tend to reduce teacher welfare and will be biased toward policies that tend to improve teacher welfare. We do not claim that educators lack altruistic motives — teachers and administrators certainly care about students. Our claim is simply that new policies that teachers like will tend to be adopted while those that teachers dislike will tend to be rejected irrespective of the effect such policies have on student performance. If objectively measured student performance suffers greatly then, of course, even teachers and administrators will back away from such policy changes. This, we believe, goes a long way toward explaining the rising emphasis on subjective assessment.

New policies that teachers like will tend to be adopted while those that teachers dislike will tend to be rejected irrespective of the effect such policies have on student performance.

REFORMS THAT DON'T WORK BUT WON'T GO AWAY

We could cite numerous examples of recent school reform efforts which support our argument that continuous improvement in K-12 education leads to the adoption of policies that do not improve educational outcomes but, because of the absence of competition, persist anyway. Here are just a few:

- **Constructivism:** Constructivism is a popular educational theory that devalues direct instruction and puts the onus on students, even preschoolers, to take responsibility for their own education through independent and cooperative learning. On the surface one cannot quibble with constructivism as a positive theory of learning since it is nearly tautological. It does not follow, however, that constructivism provides a superior model for teaching and the evidence certainly does not suggest as much. Standardized test scores have fallen over the same period that constructivism came to play an increasingly important role in modern pedagogy.
- **Block Scheduling:** Many districts have adopted “block scheduling” to facilitate more time for discussion, role-playing, and active learning pursuits. This has led to less time for traditional lecturing, which is precisely the mode of learning students will be forced to use in college. There is no evidence that these non-lecture approaches improve objective measures of educational performance.

- **Individualized Instruction:** Progressive educators say they want to individualize instruction. The only way this stands any chance of working is if the teacher has very few students and/or the differences between students are small. Hence, the latest magic bullet solution for what ails education - smaller class size. But Korean classrooms, which employ traditional pedagogy, average 30-40 students and outperform ours.
- **Authentic Assessment:** There has been a movement to adopt gradeless report cards and do away with ability grouping, thereby relieving teachers of one of their most onerous, agonizing duties — evaluating which students are achieving academically and which are not. In effect, all pupils are now “A” students, and their parents the proud progenitors of honors kids. The K-12 establishment has also been mounting a campaign against the national call for more standardized testing, offering all kinds of rationalizations for why testing is bad. To the extent that educators are promoting testing today, it is in the form of “performance assessment” and “portfolios,” which are inherently subjective. This push for more subjective forms of assessment is perfectly consistent with our view of how continuous improvement leads to lower academic achievement because subjective assessment weakens negative feedback from policies that fail to improve the academic performance of students. In so doing, subjective assessment hides the true cost of pursuing multiple “stakeholder” objectives instead of the singular objective of student academic achievement.

Schools need to abandon the assumption that change is inherently good and replace it with another notion — that we should be very cautious about contemplating change. Those involved in formulating school policies should demand objective evidence of success before considering changes in education policy.

A BETTER APPROACH

It is hard to be against something as noble-sounding as continuous improvement. Because so many of them work long hours on behalf of our children, it is also hard to think of teachers and administrators as constituting an interest group that, probably unintentionally, promotes their interest at the expense of student performance. Policy makers should nevertheless be very skeptical of continuous improvement because the policies that result will, on average, do a better job of promoting the welfare of teachers and administrators than of improving student performance. As a result, the higher the rate of policy development through continuous improvement, the more academic performance will suffer in the long run. But if continuous improvement is bad for students, then what model should schools follow?

Schools need to abandon the assumption that change is inherently good and replace it with another notion — that we should be very cautious about contemplating change. Those involved in formulating school policies should demand objective evidence of success before considering changes in education policy. In the absence of such evidence, policy makers, parents, teachers, and administrators should oppose reform. Finally, calls to replace objective forms of assessment with subjective forms of assessment should be recognized as a move that reduces negative feedback from new policies that fail to improve bona fide academic achievement.

