

Session 20

Is Human Capital the Future of Countries?

A Case for Competition in Primary and Secondary Education

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Policy makers, educators and the public at large may come by different routes, but nearly all arrive at the same conclusion: we must improve the performance of public schools if we are to perpetuate civil societies and ensure productive economies. This consensus immediately begs the question of how best to realize the improvement that is required. My suggestion: expand competition in the provision of primary and secondary public schooling.

The notion is based on a decade of research on the performance of charter schools in the United States. Charter schools are public schools that receive about the same funding as traditional public schools but are allowed under special laws to operate in a relaxed regulatory environment in exchange for stricter and faster review of results. The mantra is “Flexibility for accountability.” Today over 2.5 Million students attend over 6000 charter schools in 44 states of the country.

There are several ways that allowing charter schools to operate might be beneficial for the goal of improving education outcomes for students. Our work has tried to explore each possible mechanism. The first is that charter schools might do a better job educating their students than occurs in the local schools in the same communities. Our research shows that where the prevailing level of school performance is low –such as urban areas or communities of high social mobility– charter schools deliver substantially stronger outcomes for students. The difference most strongly favors charter schools when the students they enroll are poor, members of historically underserved ethnic groups or possess specific educational challenges. To be clear the positive effect is not universal, but the proportion of poorly performing charter schools is growing smaller each year.

The second way competition might be beneficial is that it can provide “evidence proofs” that better performance in public education is not just conceivable but achievable. One of the most profound findings about charter schools is the sheer number of charter schools that are educating identical groups of students as nearby traditional schools but get substantially greater academic growth from their students year after year. There are over one thousand charters that have such records of success. Same students, same community, same resources, but dramatic differences in results. It raises important cost-benefit questions about how schooling is done in the majority of schools.

The third potential impact of competition is that it provides the opportunity for innovation and disruption of the prevailing approaches to education. By allowing flexibility and freedom from existing rules and regulations, as well as more contemporary visions of how to delivery high quality education, schooling can be reinvented. To be sure, “new” is not always “better” but it is often enough that feasible and valuable constructs have emerged from the competitive landscape that charter schools occupy. Schools have combined recent advances in learning technologies with old-style classroom instruction to address the educational needs of every student with customized lessons. Schools have developed sophisticated curriculum to teach all the required academic content required by the state but package it in a form that emphasizes arts or science or civic issues or deep immersion in foreign language and

culture. More importantly, charter schools have shown that new configurations of labor and capital are possible and can lead to stronger results for students.

The fourth and final way that competition might impact public education is by stimulating the incumbent schools to change what they are doing. Competitive impacts can occur in two ways: either by encouraging incumbents to mimic schools with highly successful models or by prompting them to innovate on their own. And each way has its own drawback. Mimicry requires the discretion and will to adopt the proven model with fidelity; neither have been found in ample supply in the traditional US education system to date. Innovation is problematic as well: many changes have been largely cosmetic, though adjustments such as longer school days or lengthier school years are becoming common responses to competitive threats. It should be noted, however, that the more substantive changes have emerged only in places that face significant competition and only after a quarter or more of a community's students have transferred to charter schools.

To date, most of the policy discussion surrounding new public education providers has been framed in terms of "parental choice." While the conversation aims at empowering parents, it also shifts the focus away from the endemic problems of single-provider approaches to public education and the benefits that can be realized with multiple providers in a competitive system.