

Classroom-Level Root Causes of Our School System's Ineffectiveness

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It all comes down to what happens in the classroom. Virtually everyone agrees that we have a low performing school system; that not enough student engagement in important content occurs in our current school system's public school classrooms. Note that the appropriate perspective for school system reform is that a region's *school system* is the full menu of schooling options, public and private, that serves 100% of the region's schoolchildren. Since public school classrooms enroll nearly 90% of schoolchildren, and since public school system governance and funding policies impact nearly all schoolchildren, problematic public school classroom conditions that have survived decades of reform efforts will explain why we desperately need new, systemic reform strategies.

There have been five authoritative '[Nation at Risk](#)' declarations, and the latest edition of the 'Nation's Report Card', the National Assessment of Education Progress test scores, shows that only 38% of [17-year-olds](#) are proficient in reading, with 27% lacking even basic skills!!!! There has been frenzied activity since the first, 1983 [Nation at Risk](#) declaration, but also near universal failure to adequately address the core reasons for insufficient, properly focused engagement in high-value academics. It's not that the reasons are hard to grasp. They've all been noted in a piecemeal fashion; some widely noted.

1. Weak, often poorly targeted incentives, including difficulty defining and rewarding merit; much talk of accountability; little actual, meaningful accountability.
2. Classroom composition policy that maximizes learning issue diversity; minimizes engagement. One size does not fit all.
3. **High rates of out-of-subject-field teaching; for example, coaches 'teaching' math.**

4. Frustration with persistent low performance has produced educator micro-management.
5. Teacher tenure, combined with high rates of teacher burnout.
6. Misleading, boring, politically correct curricula and textbooks.
7. Difficulty maintaining discipline; [regulation and lawsuit fear](#) (click for example).

We did not address them because we've lacked leaders with the wisdom and will to propose and successfully fight for the systemic change needed to greatly improve our educators' effectiveness.

1.) With the exception of some chartered public schools (CPS), the taxpayer-financed part of our K-12 system provides for few, if any, immediate, tangible consequences for educator effectiveness, for parental involvement, or for student achievement. Even the intangibles are often misaligned. For example, it is quite common for educators to face negative peer pressure for entrepreneurial and innovative initiatives.

The widespread disconnect between pay and performance is about more than the political challenges of implementing genuine merit pay. It includes the challenges of top-down-only merit assessment, and the difficulties financing merit in the public sector. Milton Friedman doubted that merit pay could 'work' for public sector employees. There are many issues embedded in the public sector merit pay issue that will have to be left for another time. For now, it is enough to note that reward for individual educator merit, or punishment for lack thereof, is rare, and that what is rewarded in those rare instances of something called merit pay typically does not result from a very robust definition of individual merit.

Parental involvement is low because quality information about academic progress is not readily available, many of the things that concern parents are beyond their ability to influence, and children are widely passed through the system regardless of their actual academic progress. Parents and disengaged children may not recognize the consequences of poor choices, failure to pay attention, and circumstances that were not working for them until it is too late. Despite much talk

about increased accountability, it has been widely politically incorrect to hold many of the current system's players accountable for anything and then often unfairly so. We place educators in difficult circumstances and then micro-manage them, so it is hard to reasonably hold them accountable for poor results.

2.) Indeed, the classroom composition of traditional public schools makes teaching as difficult as unintentionally possible. The attendance zone monopoly of each school maximizes school-level diversity in how children learn, and what motivates them to pay attention. That is, sorting children by location maximizes learning-style diversity and diversity in students' subject theme interests. For example, a high quality science subject theme would achieve engagement of some children, but tune-out of others. And, for example, on the learning style side, some children learn more in front of a computer loaded with great instructional software. Others do better in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting. For others a high-tech-low-tech mix is best. The current system achieves very little sorting of children or educators by learning style, or subject theme interest.

Without sensible sorting, we get one-size-does-not-fit-all problems. When the only things children in a TPS classroom have in common are approximate age and their neighborhood, you need a superhero-level teacher to avoid getting lots of overwhelmed, bored, distracted, and disinterested students. It's amazing that there are some teachers that seem to have the ability to achieve high levels of engagement from a very diverse set of children. But there will never be enough super teachers, and it is doubtful that more and better teacher training can greatly improve teaching effectiveness in the typical TPS classroom setting that includes overwhelming learning issue diversity challenges even within the mainstream population. Implementation of the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act further increased that challenge by forcing the

‘mainstreaming’ of special needs children. It is very difficult to address diverse needs with a uniform product. Education reform scholar Dr. [Herbert Walberg](#) makes this salient point:

“Compared with privately provided goods and services, perhaps the most fundamental market problem with publicly funded schools is to provide a uniform education that is satisfying to all families. How difficult would it be for automobile manufacturers, restaurants, hairdressers, and barbers to satisfy the majority, let alone all, of their clients with a single, uniform product or service?”

The resulting difficulty feeling successful and maintaining good relations with parents and administrators is a key reason why so many teachers quickly abandon teaching careers, and why so many older [teachers suffer burnout](#), but stay on the job for lack of viable income-producing alternatives, and for lack of pressure to improve or exit.

The same overwhelming challenge – meeting diverse needs of each attendance zone with ‘comprehensively uniform’ TPS – explains why district superintendents struggle to dent districts’ abysmal performance, and why superintendents suffer such high turnover rates. It doesn’t help that they typically serve at the pleasure of poorly trained, weakly accountable school boards. Longtime education scholar, [Paul Hill](#), argued that, “many superintendents have concluded that, in the words of one, the job is undoable. Most agree that a successful superintendent now is usually one who has avoided a financial crisis or survived a tense labor negotiation, not one who has transformed a district’s schools.” Note that implied in the Paul Hill quote is that the typical district needs transformation.

Combine the sufficient challenges of maximized learning issue diversity with the aforementioned weak, misaligned educator incentives, politically-correct [curricula](#) and [textbooks](#), widespread poor subject mastery, and out-of-field teaching, and you begin to understand why objective data show some TPS to be better than others, but few are adequate, much less good, or all you should get for over \$13,000/child/year.

3.) The out-of-field teaching issue is another ‘priceless’ problem. Teacher pay almost always depends on just credentials and experience. Because varying pay by teacher subject field is widely politically incorrect, we have a surplus of some types of teachers, and shortages of others. New history and English teachers are much more likely to struggle to find a job teaching what they know than an aspiring teacher with a math degree. [Indeed](#), 69 percent of 5th to 8th graders are being taught math by teachers without a mathematics degree or certificate, and 93 percent of those same students are being taught physical sciences by teachers with no physical science degree or certificate. With so many math and science courses staffed by coaches, English, and history (etc.) teachers, is it any wonder that so few [US] children become engaged in those subjects, and then ultimately why we must hire so many of our scientists and engineers from outside our US-schooled population?

There are additional reasons for chronic disengagement, and I have begged the question of what could/should be done to address the learning inhibiting factors without the space in this blog to even address all of the seven I listed. Stay tuned. For now, a hint: To reduce the instructional challenges, and create tangible incentives to deliver the most urgently needed, high quality targeted instruction, we need to empower schooling consumers with information, and full control of the money earmarked for each child’s schooling, public or private; financed publicly or privately; for many families likely a mix of public and private funding to pay for the schooling of their children.

Find additional readings and links to evidence, [here](#). Originally posted [here](#), May 30, 2013.

Comment: [under construction]: For now, comment to: bigpicturedoc@sbcglobal.net