To Succeed at School Reform we Need School System Reform

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Why are the root causes of low performance so durable? Because, driven by multiple authoritative non-partisan and bipartisan ‘Nation at Risk’ declarations, the federal government and all fifty states have been pursuing school reform without school system reform. That is why we are stuck at ‘Nation at Risk’ performance levels despite massive funding growth. We are stuck at ‘gold-plated disaster’!

Let’s be clear. It is up to school operators and school-based educators to relentlessly improve their schools; to provide high value instruction, competitively. School reform is their job, and because humans have strengths and weaknesses, and because children have diverse interests and learning styles, ‘high value instruction’ means specialized instruction. We need dynamic market price signals to guide education entrepreneurs to offer the most highly valued versions of specialized instruction.

It is up to policymakers and researchers to find and implement the funding and governance policies that optimize the conditions in which administrators and educators plan and deliver instruction. As our decades of frustration with attempts at productive school reform have shown, there has not been enough school system reform. The systemic changes have been too few, often wrong, and otherwise inadequate. We lack the political will to make transformational changes, which sadly may still be good, because there is also a political wisdom deficit. For example, suppose the main sources of opposition to school choice expansion were to vanish. Many of today’s reform advocates would push for a chartered public school-centric strategy to expand choice, which could be a disaster without some of the changes needed to use the political correctness of charter school expansion as our means to pursue transformational change.
We have a lot of good educators, and more potentially outstanding educators on the sidelines, if only we would identify and craft productive governance and funding policies, and then enact them into law.