

Breathtakingly Heroic Assumptions Re-Visited

John Merrifield

May 31, 2014

“When something is stupid, you have to call it stupid.”

Incoming Teacher Union (NEA) President Garcia

“I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and *report the facts.*”

Will Rodgers

In-your-face use of the [first quote](#) above prompted me to re-visit the current system's [really stupid] persistent, breathtakingly heroic assumptions; persistent, in part, because of NEA political support for the key elements of the current system. The Will Rogers quote is evidence that the political process has a long history of producing policies founded on breathtakingly heroic assumptions. That facts are often laughable is the truth underlying jokes about state and national capitals being '[logic-free zones](#)', and the legislatures being widely seen as '[sausage factories](#);' law-making is just about as grotesque as sausage-making. This is going to be a harder-edged look at policies that hurt children and the teachers NEA President Garcia represented.

Here, with comment, are the key underlying assumptions of the U.S. K-12 school system; our governance and funding approach. It is breathtakingly heroic [stupid] to implicitly assume that:

A.) Price Signals are Unimportant; implicitly assumed by our priceless system despite 40 centuries of evidence that persistent pricelessness is always a recipe for disaster. Priceless school systems are overwhelmingly the norm, which is why the world's best systems are still low-performing. One especially disastrous example of pricelessness is the so-called 'single salary schedule' where we pretend that the same price/salary will produce the desired number of each kind of teacher; for example, math, science, history, and English teachers. Because that is not true – a stupid delusion that it could be – we get shortages of some kinds of teachers (typically, math, science, and special needs) which leads to the out-of-field teaching that is a key 'root of the low-

performance problem' (see my *School System Reform* [book]); for example, math and science classes are often staffed by teachers without math and science training.

- B.) Monopoly Status Enhances Efficiency. There's not much comment needed here. We've enshrined into federal anti-trust law that much less market dominance than is possessed by any state's public school system is severely detrimental to the functioning of industries. All of us understand, instinctively, that except in industries that are natural monopolies (city water, for example), robust competition is the desirable state of affairs. Except in very small towns, K-12 schooling is not a natural monopoly, and technology is increasing potential market contestability everywhere, including small towns and rural areas. But, we grant a public finance monopoly to government-owned schools that yields a roughly 90% public school market share. That's breathtakingly heroic [stupid].
- C.) In a closely related implicit bizarre assumption: public funding should belong to government-owned service providers (public schools), not the service consumers. It means that unhappy consumers that opt out of subsidized services must leave the subsidy help behind. That policy is contrary to the reality that taxpayers pay school taxes to provide schooling to children, not to assure employment for public school personnel.
- D.) Incentives Don't Matter; an implicit assumption that can only amount to hope triumphing over mountains of experience, and yet the delusion persists as policy with far fewer real exceptions than noise about alleged merit pay might imply to some of you. There are very few places that pay public school teachers according to their effectiveness, in part because it is, indeed, very difficult to gauge teacher effectiveness in the unnecessarily challenging circumstances of the typical public school teacher (see my *School System Reform* [book]), including absence of a direct customer role, via choice, in identifying merit. Public school teachers typically lack the professional status to decide how to accomplish their mission. They are typically assigned a

curriculum and textbooks, and quite often a strict timetable. Micro-management is common; all of it, five-alarm stupid.

E.) ‘Comprehensively uniform’ schools are the best approach; specialization within large uniform conglomerate organizations is better than specialization by organizations. Again, that implicit assumption amounts to hope triumphing over experience, including, but definitely not limited to our school system experiences.

F.) There are best practices and the political process will discover and implement them. That implicit assumption is embodied in the widely criticized public school system’s dominant form of instruction delivery, comprehensively uniform schools. Assigning children to such schools implicitly assumes that the vast majority of children should be taught most of the same things in the same way. We see the stupidity of that in persistent performance outcomes with a high percentage of children not proficient, including a third or more, typically, ‘below basic’.

G.) In a closely related implicit assumption, student ability and public school educator talent is seen as one dimensional. That is, no one has strengths and weaknesses; student ability is either great, good, mediocre, or poor, not a mixture that depends on pedagogy or subject matter. The implicit perception of teacher strength is limited to a subject field. Otherwise, teachers are seen as great, good, average, and others. In fact, a competent teacher is often great for some students, but not helpful for others. Most of us know from looking in the mirror that humans are only rarely one-dimensional. We recognize our own strengths and weaknesses, but not that students and teachers have them, at least not through our governance and funding policies. A school system that truly recognizes the fundamental fact of multi-dimensional student ability and teacher talent cannot resemble the one we have.

So, built upon a realization of our system’s breathtaking heroic assumptions, [‘Nation at Risk’](#) empirical evidence becomes robustly credible. Challenges to that evidence – that a system based on

such assumptions can yield acceptable results – are, at best, hopeful with a vivid imagination; paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson, such challengers, “expect what never was and never will be.”