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Public Policy Analysis

Education Policy Analysis

There are many issues related to education that should be addressed by policy. Debates about the merits of public versus private education, local versus federal control, and funding on every level are generally cited as the biggest issues in education. However, another constant and perhaps more interesting debate is what the official role of schools in society is. While legislation attempting to improve education systems in the United States has been implemented, its effectiveness is highly debated. What system of education will best prepare our citizens to participate in our democracy and compete on the world stage, and how can we improve our existing system to make students our priority?

According to Dlugash, there are three goals a school must fulfill as a social institution. These are preparation for citizenship, effective worker training, and enabling social mobility.¹ While these are not the only functions of school as a social institution, they work well as a starting place for our idea of what a school's purpose should be. Seemingly to move towards these goals, school standards have shifted recently from content knowledge based to skill acquisition based.² Part of this shift has occurred as a result of Common Core curriculum. Funded primarily by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Common Core is not detailed enough to become a national curriculum but is rather implemented in addition to state standards.³ In this way, control remains on the local level. However, misinformation regarding Common Core is often spread, and many believe it to be a national curriculum that will take control from

¹ Dlugash, Mark. *Innovating Schools: American School Reform for the 21st Century*. 2014

² Kenna, Joshua and William Russel. *Implications of Common Core State Standards on the Social Studies*. 2014.

³ Toscano, Michael. *The Common Core: Far from Home*. 2013.

local schools and give unwarranted control to the federal government. This became a hot-button issue because of the constant debate about local versus federal control of schools. While Common Core is not a national curriculum, some argue because of its funding by the ultra-rich that it is a hastily implemented experiment at the expense of American children.⁴ This may contain some truth, as some states who initially adopted Common Core have ultimately discontinued implementation.

Another debated role of schools is to provide for the needs of students beyond the academic realm. As seen in the documentary, students are not just academically inclined robots, but instead are human beings with concerns and dynamic lives outside of the school day.⁵ This is something every teacher knows. When students come to school, they bring with them a wide variety of life experiences. A newer move in education is the implementation of Trauma Informed Schools. These schools expand the role of the school beyond academics and provide other services to students who have experienced adverse events which hinder their ability to learn. Students who attend these schools and receive services often perform better and stay in school longer than a student who has experienced or is experiencing trauma and attends a traditional school.⁶

One of the big problems in our current system is the increased focus on testing. Because school funding or grants from the federal government have been tied to test scores, students spend more time in school testing than ever. Eighth graders on average spend over 25 hours testing, not counting tests for their classes, only standardized testing. Teachers feel pressure to

⁴ Toscano, 2013.

⁵ "Dropout Nation," FRONTLINE, accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/dropout-nation/>.

⁶ "TSA | Why Services to Support Traumatized Students Should Be Available in Schools," accessed October 29, 2019, <http://traumaawareschools.org/services>.

teach to the tests to increase scores and maintain funding.⁷ Therefore, they spend less time on engaging content that encourages complex thinking processes and more time on memorization or simply teaching testing strategies.

There are many options regarding education policy, although it is difficult to pinpoint what the most effective system would be. As with any policy, one option is always to do nothing, and see how the system works itself out in the absence of new policy. However, we have already seen some of the ineffective functions of our current system. Policy could address the role of schools in society and make one of two choices: to lessen the expectations placed on schools or increase them. Lowering expectations for the services schools are expected to perform would possibly save money and save educators a lot of time and energy. However, another societal organization may need to pick up the slack left and provide more services to struggling students and families. Raising the bar for what schools are expected to do and what services they should offer would be expensive, but quite possibly effective. Schools and teachers are uniquely positioned to notice and cater to the needs to society. Often, teachers spend more time with children than the children's parents and see issues long before parents or others might catch on.

Another policy change that should be considered is the funding of school as tied to standardized testing. The efficacy of this policy needs to be seriously researched and evaluated as current focus on testing takes focus away from students. Education should not have to focus on questions of money. Education policy should seek to make students the priority within education. The policies that support this are those that increase the number of services provided in schools for struggling students and their families, such as Trauma Informed Schools. Because

⁷ Lyndsey Layton, "Study Says Standardized Testing Is Overwhelming Nation's Public Schools," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2015, sec. Education, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/study-says-standardized-testing-is-overwhelming-nations-public-schools/2015/10/24/8a22092c-79ae-11e5-a958-d889faf561dc_story.html.

teachers are in a position to notice issues within education, they should be given resources to serve their students.

Curriculum should be focused on relevant skills and a base of useful knowledge rather than on a national standard. Sometimes, it is best for these decisions to be made on the local level, but they should probably follow some form of national guideline, which would enable transferring students to enter into new classrooms more seamlessly. This could potentially be based on Common Core, with some revision necessary. While standardized tests have their place in education when used as tools to determine shortcomings and assess student progress, they should not be tied to school funding. Rather, they should be used to determine which schools need assistance providing adequate education for students. Students need to be the focus of education in order for education to meet its goals of citizenship preparation, effective worker training, and most importantly providing a base for social mobility.

Changing the focus of education from funding, testing, and the fight for control to a focus on students and their wellbeing would be expensive and politically difficult, but the social ramifications would be overwhelmingly positive in the long run. Citizens would be better equipped to participate in our democracy and compete throughout the world, while gaining opportunities for social mobility.