Analytic Note:

General Sources of Leverage in Changing the K-12 Sector

The first is to use the powers of government to produce significant changes. As a historical fact, it is probably fair to say that engaging the powers of government in education has had the largest, most enduring, and in many ways the deepest impact on the K-12 system in the United States. Until the governments of the United States at the local, state, and federal level began taxing and regulating citizens to support a public educational system, the K-12 system consisted mostly of home schooling and privately funded , often religiously based, schools. That system of suppliers was importantly shaped by the use of state authority that required children to go to school, and to parents to provide for their education. In effect, the states drafted all students into an educational army. That use of government assets was complemented by the use of government taxes to support the provision of educational services to those who could not afford, or did not want to pay for their children’s education. It is the use of government authority to require education, to regulate educational suppliers, and to raise taxes to pay for the provision of publicly financed education that created a K-12 system in which \_\_% of the financing of the K-12 system is public, and in which \_\_\_% of the students attend schools that are not only publicly financed, but publicly owned, directed, and staffed.

But one has to be careful in using the term government to describe the above events. For the most part, the government involved was not the federal government. It was primarily local governments, and secondarily state governments who used governmental powers to create and shape the K-12 system. While the government policies enacted at local, state, and federal levels were congruent to some degree, and thus created some commonalities in educational services and results across the nation, the fact that there were more than \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ individual governments – each claiming a significant amount of sovereignty over the process of educating children in their jurisdictions – ensured that the system that developed would be highly decentralized (even though it was being managed by “government”), and would show a great deal of variation in its organization, methods, and accomplishments.

The fact that the governmental system itself was highly decentralized meant that the capacity of central governments to shape local practices would be limited. On the other hand, it meant that there were lots of opportunities for educational reformers of one stripe o another to find some place that might experiment with their ideas. They could work not only in the world of home schooling and independent schools using their own energy and funds to produce educational improvements, they could even find the means to persuade local schools to experiment.

The second idea is to use the power of markets to develop and spread good ideas. This idea is often juxtaposed to the idea of using governmental leverage to produce large scale results. In this familiar idea, governments may be able to produce large scale change through the use of their authority and money, but they are unable to offer anything other than a one-size-fits all educational system that is incapable of innovating, or responding to individual needs. To have a K-12 system that be more innovative and responsive, and produce more client satisfaction and desired social results, it would be better to rely on the power of markets.

It is worth noting that this common indictment of government in its current role as an educational provider stands in sharp contradiction to the reality of the educational system which is that it does offer many different kinds of education keyed to the preferences and capacities of local communities. It is true that it does not offer exactly what each individual within a local community might want for their child (or what the child might want for themselves). But it does offer local communities (if not the individuals living within them) a significant opportunity to choose for themselves (as a small collective) what kind of education they want for their children. And when they look across the landscape of national offerings, they have much from which to choose, each with varying price tags in terms of taxes required to support them.

Still, it is worth thinking about what a significant shift in educational policy towards a “market oriented system” could produce. Think first about the shift. In order for this shift to occur, significant policy changes have to be made by governments. As a general rule, they have to decide how they are going to change the way that they finance education. One question here is about the level of financing.

But an equally big question is whether and how they are prepared to shift the terms of accountability for the use of public funds. In the traditional system, accountability for the use of public funds is produced through the oversight of elected officials, aided by professionals of various kinds. That system of accountability is also constructed by courts who seek to ensure the protection of individual rights, the imposition of individual duties, and the assurance of justice and fairness in the use of educational resources and discipline. The values of efficiency and effectiveness in achieving collectively desired educational outcomes is valued by the first system of accountability. The values of justice, fairness, and the vindication of individual rights valued by the second.

The idea that the society as a whole should tax itself to produce funds to support education, and then give those public dollars to individuals to spend on whatever education they deemed valuable to themselves and their children in the form of educational vouchers would have a profound effect on that traditional system of accountability. One challenge was whether parts of the educational system that had previously operated on private effort and funds would now by supported by public funds: namely, home-schooling, parochial schools, and privately funded and operated independent schools. A second challenge was how to view the impact that empowering the individual client of the school system relative to the collective that was providing the funds would have on school performance.

It is important to see that the idea of vouchers was not just a new way of finacing the school system; it was also a way of transforming the behaviorally powerful system of accountability that would guide the activities of educational suppliers in both the private and public sectors. Exit, Voice and Loyalty as means of accountability. The shift to vouchers was explicitly intended to empower clients relative to the payers and authorizers. They were now in a stronger position to demand and get a response from the educational suppliers. Taxpayers didn’t need to worry as long as they could maintain control over total spending. But educational suppliers would be forced to pay close attention to their customers.