Can One Size Fit All with "Micro-Choice"?

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This *Wall Street Journal* article on a traditional school district reforming its instructional approaches to much more extensively deploy computer software reminded me of my extensive conversations with Utah State Senator Howard Stephenson (R – Salt Lake) at the 2014 meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council. Senator Stephenson is not opposed to school choice expansion, but because of the resistance to it he spends a lot of time trying to promote what he calls micro-choice through technology. Micro-choice through technology can ease the differentiated instruction task for a diverse classroom for some subjects. That it seems to make a big difference in some cases is another testament to how poorly one size fits all in the current system.

So, while I applaud all cost effective strategies to increase engagement above the low level that results from the comprehensive uniformity of traditional public schools, we need to keep the micro-choice through technology strategy in perspective. Because of its limitations, even with further development of software, better use of technology is not a substitute for school system transformation that determines what is taught, how, where, and by whom (or what) through a decentralized planning process guided by market-driven price signals.

Let's review the roots of the persistent low performance problem and see which of them are addressed by increased reliance on software-delivered instruction. Also, keep in mind that the potential benefits of increased reliance on technology, and the benefits that will be realized by its actual use in public school classrooms, may be entirely different things. There is already an extensive record of status quo defenders using their political clout to block adoption of new capabilities delivered by technology. And the history of computer use to improve instruction in traditional public schools is anything but encouraging.

One of the key roots of the problem was rampant out-of-field teaching. Will technology advance make curricula teacher-proof, so that a teacher lacking, say, a math degree can teach a math class as well as a teacher with a math degree? I doubt it, but it will make out-of-field teaching less costly. Then there is the current system's struggles to align incentives with effectiveness. The current system makes it difficult to measure merit, objectively, and then properly (in a perverse way) compensates the vast majority of public school system educators without regard to their effectiveness, or failure to be. Technology can help use measure some aspects of merit, but that may not change the refusal to take it into account in educators' paychecks.

Teacher micro-management is one of the roots of the problem of persistent low performance. A heavier dose of technology could push that either way; increased micro-management, since examination of software can make it easier for the authorities to specify EXACTLY what a teacher will present to students. But use of technology can ease the impact of teacher micro-management on students with the dictated content coming to students in a variety of forms and speeds.

A heavier dose of technology _CAN_ ease the teacher burnout issue, including distaste for contact with parents, in part by re-defining the nature of the teacher's part of the instructional process. The adult in the room with the students, or online, may no longer deliver lectures, or other types of traditional lessons, or at least do it a lot less often. Instead, that adult may roam the room to lend assistance where the software does not completely address student struggles, or not all types of struggles. Encounters with parents may become less contentious because the technology uses _CAN_ facilitate more customization than is possible by human attempts at differentiated instruction.

A heavier dose of technology cannot take the politics out of deciding what is taught. Improved delivery of politically-correct nonsense is not an acceptable substitute for engaging,

though perhaps controversial content, or content that want their children to learn even if it differs from some of the content other parents view as essential.