To even credibly imagine that one size could come close to fitting all, it must be possible to effectively ‘differentiate’ instruction, which is ability grouping by subject on steroids. ‘On steroids’ because with the classroom diversity that can result from our current system’s practice of sorting children only by neighborhood and age, appropriately differentiated instruction can mean a different teaching approach for every child.

Finally, specific evidence of the futility of the obviously costly and stressful challenge of having each teacher develop and deliver multiple pedagogical approaches is going mainstream public. The title of Dr. James Delisle’s January 7 Education Week Op-Ed says it plainly: “Differentiation Doesn’t Work,” and now the mainstream knows ‘the Emperor has no clothes’.

Further proof and spreading the word that within-classroom differentiated instruction does not work will demolish one of the key counter-arguments to the student diversity argument for school choice. The viability of differentiated instruction is a cornerstone of the public finance monopoly business model; i.e. the status quo. Based on several specific studies cited, here’s how Dr. Delisle sees it:

“Differentiation is a failure, a farce, and the ultimate educational joke played on countless educators and students. Differentiation is a promise unfulfilled; a boondoggle of massive proportions.”

Dr. Delisle, it sounds like you’re waffling. Please tell us what you really think. Apparent long-time denial of the obvious is why I used the famous ‘emperor has no clothes’ metaphor. It is obvious from the big picture of persistent low performance that what we’re doing – our current system’s instructional strategy for a diverse population – isn’t working. But it has been politically incorrect to admit it, much less announce it, publicly.
“Differentiation, in practice, is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back.”

“84% of teachers, nationwide stated that differentiation was somewhat or very difficult.”

But we have insisted that it must be made to work:

“By my (Delisle) count, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has released more than 600 publications on differentiation, and countless publishers have followed suit with manuals and software that will turn [they imagine] every classroom into a [successfully] differentiated one.”

And, “in every case, [attempts at] differentiated instruction dumbed down instruction.”

We also need to continue to argue that our experience with large comprehensive campuses tells us that between-classroom differentiated instruction is not nearly an adequate way to address student diversity. Comprehensive traditional public school campuses have become the norm, and ‘Nation at Risk’ low performance persists, despite a tripling of per pupil funding in the past fifty years. We need differentiation by campus; that is, specialized schooling options. We need a dynamic, diverse menu of specialized schooling options orchestrated by price change on a level playing field to exploit the diversity of our educators to address the diversity of our children.