

Intellectual Prisoners of the Status Quo Create Debilitating False Imperatives

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January 23, 2014

[Bruce Baker](#) and [Anthony Cody](#) argue that ‘Some Charter Schools are Becoming Parasitic.’ They base that verdict on differences between traditional public schools’ and *some* chartered public schools’ mix of special needs and low income family students they enroll. They label charter schools that have an allegedly easier to teach mix (less ‘special ed’, less low income, etc.) ‘parasites’ because they leave supposedly harder to educate children in traditional public schools. Their assertion rests on two fallacies; a.) that harder/easier to teach is entirely a function of socio-economics and the official special needs categories; and b.) that charter schools specialize disproportionately in instructional approaches that attract non-poverty, mainstream children. Regarding a.), Baker and Cody assume that what has been true of the one-size-fits-all approach of our comprehensively uniform, traditional public schools, is simply a fact, which is what ‘intellectual prisoners of the status quo’ means. In several previous blogs, I have argued that school systems that foster widespread [ability-grouping by subject](#), and an array of pedagogical options to address student diversity, would improve aggregate teacher effectiveness. The per pupil dollar cost of different ways to engage children in high value learning will vary, but not necessarily in ways that correlate with student socio-economic status. Regarding b.), it is my impression that charters disproportionately enroll ‘disadvantaged students’, which has led to another bizarre criticism; that an entirely predictable correlation between instructional approaches that target disadvantaged students and low student socioeconomic status amounts to segregation even though it is performance enhancing and voluntary.

Their bottom-line fallacy is that campus-level specialization in targeted instructional approaches is always ineffective, and sometimes harmful to students in traditional public schools. Since even the limited specialization that is possible in a few states with priceless chartering (no price signals to motivate and focus chartering) does not focus on traditional public schools' most successful students, the net, typical effect of increased availability of specialized schooling on traditional public schools (TPS) is to cause the exodus of children not happy in TPS, which should leave behind more academically, homogenous, easier to teach student groups. That is why the Baker/Cody attack on specialization, and the resulting false imperative that all schools should teach all children – share equally in the challenge to serve the traditionally hardest to serve – is so unfortunate, and debilitating to the extent that it is persuasive.

Even though decades of frenzied effort has not yet produced a formula for high performing, comprehensively uniform mega-schools, Baker and Cody don't accept failure to specialize/customize as a noteworthy reason for the current system's persistently abysmal academic performance. They attack attempts to better serve some children through campus-level specialization because they see specialization as one-dimensional; an attempt to skim out traditional public schools' better performing students. But appropriate specialization-customization, which requires universal, approximately level-playing-field school choice, is necessarily, like student ability, multi-dimensional. Such specialization - customization of instruction - would match educator strengths with student desires and needs. The current system's better students, and especially currently disengaged students with some extraordinary abilities, need that kind of matching at least as much as disadvantaged students.

The February 6 blog post will address an 'intellectual prisoner of the status quo' fallacy noted by Baker and Cody: "Chartery [sic] success (accompanied by headlines, news magazine

segments and visits from politicians) is largely defined as A) getting higher test scores or greater test score growth, B) for less money, and C) with the “same” kids. Because this is the supposed definition of success, punditry around charter schooling – and research designed to endorse this punditry – makes every effort to validate A, while obfuscating or completely misrepresenting B and/or C.” Indeed, as Baker and Cody note, it is [sadly] a widespread definition of success. But they do not criticize it for being false. They criticize charter school advocates for not being true to it. In the February 6 post, I’ll explain that the right definition of success is that passage of the charter law improves the aggregate outcomes of the state’s school system, which means the overall performance of 100% of schoolchildren.