

More of the Same, Harder: Symbolism Not Transformational Policy Entrepreneurship

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While it seems true that watering down school system reform proposals [doesn't seem to weaken](#) the opposition from the usual suspects, would-be-reformers have been pursuing resume-building symbolism instead of substantive, transformational policies. I'm not naming names because I don't know if the key proponents of the largely symbolic policy reforms (all, so far) enacted on their watch were all that was possible, politically, or if they thought their proposals adequately addressed the low performance problem, or if they were unwilling to spend the political capital to achieve more.

When you achieve all that is politically possible without precluding more far-reaching measures later, you've achieved a lot more than most of us will achieve in a lifetime. You've improved the lives of thousands of children that find a better fit on the current menu of schooling options. But if you help thousands when you could have helped tens of thousands, or millions, to try to have it both ways, politically - achieve school choice expansion as a resume item without alienating grassroots proponents of the current system - then there is a major attitude problem; pursuit of ambition at the expense of public service.

In between those extremes of getting all you can, and only getting enough to achieve a resume item at minimum political cost is the possibility that key leaders may believe the same fallacy that infects suburbanites, everywhere, that low performance is confined to poor neighborhoods in the inner city, or that there are some 'failed schools' and that the others are performing adequately for the vast majority of children assigned to them. I directly encountered that delusion in a 2007 conversation with some Utah state legislators. They had just enacted a

narrowly targeted tuition voucher program; later over-turned by a referendum. I asked them why they had restricted eligibility for the vouchers; which legislator votes were flipped by including the eligibility targeting. I was stunned by the response; supposedly no vote flipping rationale for leaving many families ineligible. They thought the ineligible were served just fine by their assigned public school. Of course many families think the current system is a good deal, but not nearly all assigned to any school, and many of the currently satisfied might later realize that a transformational reform will deliver an even better deal. [Earlier](#) I discussed the myth that the better assigned public schools are good. Indeed, even the vast majority of the top-ranked traditional public schools are '[Not as Good as You Think](#)'.

This time around, with recent [potentially productive leadership](#) turnover in many states, we need to denounce symbolic acts of ambition and demand their replacement with substantive, productive school system changes. I say 'potentially productive leadership' because there has been a lot more talk than substantive action. Naturally, I'd prefer that the policy changes be the ones I've laid out: 1.) End the discrimination against families that believe privately-produced schooling options would work better for their children than the assigned public school used because of its public finance monopoly; 2.) allow public-private shared financing of tuition, and; 3.) little or no regulation of schooling content, or pedagogy.