Revolutionizing Assessment in a One-Dimensional, One-Size-Fits-All World

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April 15, 2015

Victoria Sears "Preparing for a Renaissance in Assessment" describes an 88-page essay by Peter Hill and Michael Barber, education leadership professors that have held a variety of high level administrative and policymaking positions. Here are the critical, unstated underlying assumptions: 1.) Since Hill-Barber make no mention of school choice or ability grouping, all of the formal schooling in their worldview occurs on government-run campuses that will have a curriculum imagined to be appropriate for all. 2.) In the Hill-Barber worldview, children differ for schooling purposes only in their readiness and the pace they can sustain. Hill and Barber mention the increased need for personalization of instruction, but only so that students can, "progress at different rates and with time and support varied to meet individual needs." In that worldview, children are high-, medium-, or low-ability. In that worldview, children don't have strengths or weaknesses, or thematic passions to exploit to engage them in learning, or fail to engage them if not exploited; no need for specialized schooling options. 3.) There is no need for changed incentives in the Hill-Barber worldview. They acknowledge that, "the current K-12 system is broken," but they seem to believe that educators will succeed once they have the new information that the digital revolution can deliver if properly exploited. The current system would work a lot better if only educators had better assessments to guide their efforts. 4.) In that Hill-Barber worldview, teacher quality is also one-dimensional. There is no thought that some individuals could be good at teaching some things in particular ways, and ineffective at teaching other things in other ways; something specialized schools of choice could exploit. Like students, Hill and Barber see teachers as high- or low-ability; no strengths and weaknesses.

Hill and Barber have yet to connect their all-encompassing one-dimensionality assumptions to their recognition that, "even the top-performing systems in the world have hit a performance ceiling." South Korea has the top PISA score yet the South Koreans regard their system as much in need of drastic improvement. One of the key reasons we need low-restriction, universal school choice is to replace top-down accountability to the well-meaning, but partially blind Peter Hills and Michael Barbers of the world (seemingly the vast majority of the education establishment) with decentralized planning driven by bottom-up accountability to millions of families independently making schooling arrangements that fit their children.

So, sure let's revolutionize assessment. In the real world of multi-dimensional human diversity, truly revolutionized assessment of schooling outcomes would not directly yield much performance improvement, but the much clearer picture of just how badly the current system is performing (more informative autopsy) might help us find the will to adopt appropriate transformational systemic change. Improved autopsy has been the main benefit of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB has greatly improved our knowledge of the 'Nation at Risk' outcomes of the public school system part of the current school system.