

Accountability and One-Dimensional Thinking

John Merrifield

June 28, 2015

Justin Minkel, Arkansas' 2007 Teacher of the Year, has been a [frequent critic](#) of [school grading rubrics](#). [So have I](#), but with different [explanations](#) and [conclusions](#); for example that we need to empower clients to impose subjective accountability through school choice, assisted by multi-dimensional data systems. As I said then, “attempts to characterize multi-dimensional schooling services with a single metric is a hazardous task, not just for the consumers of the product, but also its producers.”

Traditional public school accountability to authority-only drives the tendency to distill all of the measurable factors into a single number. The authorities are very busy, and a ranking based on a single number also serves the ‘[appearance of fairness](#)’ imperative that drives so much government action. That brings us back to the merits and de-merits of Master Teacher Minkel’s complaint; that the rubric didn’t adequately consider that his school is a really nice place to work where the staff tries really hard, and has some success stories. Indeed, such factors would weigh heavily in school choice decisions for children with learning style needs and engagement factors that match the school’s academic “strengths.”

Mr. Minkel did not mention any school weaknesses, but the scoring rubric that earned the school a ‘D’ indicates that there must be some; perhaps assigned too much weight, but there nevertheless. ‘One-size,’ even with a caring staff that includes at least one Master Teacher, was not fitting all, and it never will. And while it is important to consider “value-added” (student gains vs. student level), at some point the absolute level of academic ability has to count too. Otherwise, a school can get a great looking grade just by moving disadvantaged children up to

the very low overall average for a [‘Nation at Risk’](#); where highly touted schools are mostly [“Not as Good as You Think.”](#) In other words, poverty might be a solid ‘excuse’ for starting way behind, but not for still finishing behind after 13 years of schooling to the tune of \$13,000 per student per year. Persistence in maintaining hard-to-teach, virtually designed to fail settings in the traditional public schools that have the monopoly on taxpayer funding is why so many students never achieve the school setting that would work well for them. So, family socioeconomic status strongly explains differences in student achievement even after thirteen years of expensive schooling; that is, a lot of children are left behind. They never catch up to even a low ‘Nation at Risk’ standard achieved by others with similar intellectual capacity.