

The School System Transformation Dream Team

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We need to identify the governance and funding strategies that can produce a high-performing school system, and then achieve one of them, politically. As noted in my “[Lurking Dangers](#)” blog, part of that process has to be an active awareness of the need to avoid [scandals](#), bad data, and [bad experiments](#). That will take one or more well-financed organizations with the wisdom to define the critical roles and hire the best people for them. *It may be unwise to seek too much in one person.* Are there any individuals with the right mix of communication and short-run policymaking and deal-making skills, plus long-run economic and political vision (intellectual gravitas)? I doubt it. Hoping that there is, and then hiring the best available, but not sufficiently multi-faceted, candidate could be a big mistake. If I am right, it will take a team approach; an executive council rather than a CEO.

Before I define the job descriptions of an appropriate team, I want to elaborate on a key basis for my fear that we could botch this. I get around quite a bit, and I have yet to meet anyone with anywhere close to the combined political and economic intellectual gravitas needed by a school system reform movement that does not exist yet. I include myself because of political vision and deal-making weaknesses.

The non-economists doing policy design or research in this area just don't have any idea how industries can/will evolve under different conditions that policymakers can influence, and some conditions that are beyond their ability to influence. That group's great data analysts often fail to align their empirical studies with properly framed questions. Their policy recommendations imply failure to recognize that there are alternatives to [central planning schemes](#), or a strong preference for central planning schemes – synonymous with ‘price-less’ - that would epitomize ‘hope triumphing

over our experience' with policy adoption and policy implementation struggles. Actual implementation of one of their doomed proposals carries a very high risk of taking policy options off the table for a long time through [scandal](#) or weak performance that discredits general types of policies, like school choice, that could have worked in different packages.

The economists active in this policy arena are mostly, perhaps almost entirely, brilliant econometricians, but not the needed true 'price theorists' that have thought out the dynamics of how various starting points could or would not evolve into the needed, high performing, relentlessly improving diverse menu of schooling options. I once asked Milton Friedman if he agreed with my belief that few economists remember that 'economist' should mean 'price theorist'. He agreed, and said it is a serious problem. I'm the only economist in the school system reform policy arena that has noted the significance of the '[price control](#)' that is ubiquitous now, and the [criticality of 'price decontrol](#)'. And there is a zero probability that the legal-political scholars and political operatives in this policy arena grasp the [need to understand and exploit dynamic price signals](#).

I propose a three role (A, B, and lead C) executive council team. The person in role A must have the final say when moving forward by consensus is not possible. That person (A) must have a multi-disciplinary background, including some basic economic analysis skills, but mostly be a political visionary able to envision a long-term political strategy that combines the incremental changes feasible in the short run with proposals to phase-in (if needed) the needed end-state governance and funding policies.

A market guru must assume Role B. The person in role B must be an entrepreneur or economist that understands the specialization, competition, and free enterprise processes and hasn't forgotten that economist is synonymous with Price Theorist; someone that really understands how [price systems can work](#), and how they are likely to operate under various sets of possible funding and governance policies. The B requirements describe people like Milton Friedman, Friedrich

Hayek, and Thomas Sowell. Awesome people that they were, they still lacked the critical role A skills. Role B is my skill set. The person in role B needs to spend a lot of his/her time as an active researcher, and research leader, and attend lots of conferences to fine-tune and strengthen the case for the specifics of their economic vision.

The role C niche may require multiple occupants. Those persons (C) are here/now political operatives. They need to work with A and B to make sure that what is done to help children as much as possible within current political constraints is not at odds with the long-run economics and political vision imperatives. They cannot be put in charge. Sadly, lacking that mix of people in the key activist organizations, a lot of what has been happening in various policy arenas, and is happening now, with the best of intentions, has already created barriers to likely critical funding and governance policies. For example, the [unwarranted hyping of Milwaukee's weak voucher](#) and charter combination as a test of market accountability in action has already led some prominent school choice proponents to join opponents in concluding that school choice cannot be the urgently needed school system transformation catalyst. That is certainly at least a premature conclusion because the Milwaukee school system is a [lousy market experiment](#); so is New Orleans. If a good market experiment would argue for school choice expansion, which I believe is likely because of indirect evidence, the Milwaukee and New Orleans experiences' failure to live up to the hype may prove to be devastatingly misleading.

This is VERY, VERY important to our country and world; REALLY. The adequately resourced organizations committed to school system transformation should probably rely on a carefully crafted team, not a single, best available role A-B-C combination. Failure to adequately and realistically define roles can create unrealistic expectations for individuals with key weaknesses. There are no strengths that can adequately compensate for inability to envision an end-state in which the primary and secondary education industry is great, and relentlessly improving.

And there are no strengths that can adequately compensate for lack of a long-run political vision for how to get there from here, including all of the things that can derail it, like hyping [lousy experiments](#), or relying on [lousy data](#). We need that School System Reform Dream Team to successfully [avoid policy nightmares](#).