

Challenging monopoly

BY DIANE RAVITCH



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GLOBAL COMPETITION has forced American business to learn about customer satisfaction, lean management and fast response to changing market conditions. American education has never learned those lessons.

Instead, our school systems are a relic of state socialism in the midst of a dynamic economy. They thrive by operating as a government monopoly, free of any meaningful standards or accountability for performance. They are managed by their employees, for the benefit of their employees, with minimal concern for "customer" satisfaction.

All of the incentives in the school system are backward. The more students in a school who fail, the larger the level of public subsidies to the school. The larger the number of students who can be labeled "special education" or "learning disabled" or bilingual, the greater the flow of public funds. There are no rewards for schools that educate their students very well or reduce the number of students needing special programs.

Being a government monopoly, the school system abhors competition and choice. Superintendents and school boards stand together in opposition to any challenge to their hegemonic control over public funds for education. They adamantly refuse to permit any experiments that might demonstrate a better way to educate children.

In 1992 the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development published a study of schooling in ten nations that showed our own system to be top-heavy with administrators and support staff. The U.S. was the only nation in which a majority (51%) of education workers were not teachers. By contrast, three-fourths of all education staff in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan and the Netherlands teach children.

The monopoly works very well for the adults who work for it, but is indifferent to the consumers of education—parents and children. The single most important power that a consumer has—the right to go elsewhere—does not exist in public education. The consumer must accept whatever is offered in the public sector or else pay to find something better. Bad luck to those who lack the means to move to a better neighborhood or to pay for private school.

The inherent problems of a service provided by a government monopoly are at their worst in big cities, where many families cannot afford to buy private education. Sclerotic bureaucracies long ago ceased to function effectively, and what they do best is to provide secure jobs and pensions for their employees.

In big cities, the central bureaucracy arrogates to itself the power to make all decisions about hiring, staffing, maintenance, food services, transportation, construction, security and curriculum. It cannot trust

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principals to manage their own budgets or schools. Nor can it take the risk of supplying meaningful standards and tests that might inform parents how well their children are doing.

Any effort to shake up the status quo is called an attack on public education, as though the Founding Fathers meant to create the cumbersome bureaucracies that run our big-city schools and state departments of education. Any effort to provide poor children with a scholarship to leave the public sector (as college students regularly do) evokes claims that money is being diverted from the public schools.

In enthusiastically supporting Bill Clinton, the providers of public education have bet on a candidate who is committed to protect their monopoly over public funding. Nevertheless, this game cannot be continued indefinitely. The tide everywhere is running against monopolies. In state after state, community after community, parents are looking for something better for their children, knowing that the world of work grows increasingly competitive.

In the past five years 25 states have passed charter laws that allow parents and teachers to break out of the system. Public opinion polls show a steady increase in support for some kind of voucher system.

Some of these approaches will work; others will not. But we will never know unless we try. And until we insist that student performance—not good intentions—be the measure of our schools.