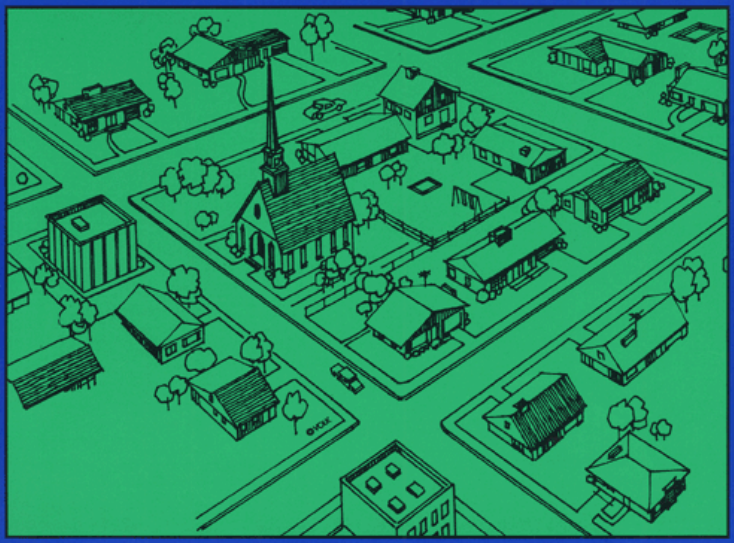
EDUCATION:



How Do We Get the Results We Want?

In a recent international competition, American students placed last in mathematics and near the bottom in science. This discouraging result probably did not surprise many Americans. Since publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, some 300 studies have pounded home the point that our educational system is not producing educated citizens.

Most Americans agree that reforms are needed. But they have been unable to agree on what should be done. Arguments about budgets, curriculum, teacher proficiency, and discipline have too often exhausted participants without bringing them to any common ground upon which a community may gather to set direction and take action.

INTRODUCTION: WHO SHOULD CALL THE SHOTS?

This booklet is intended to help communities break out of that impasse by framing the argument in different terms. It bypasses the familiar arguments about **how** to reform our schools, to focus on **who** can most effectively bring about the educational results we want. We will look at that question from four different perspectives.

OPTION #1 treats education as a product that can be improved by good management. Schools should be managed by an experienced administrator who should be accountable for measurable results.

OPTION #2 calls for decisions to be made by professional educators in the schools. Principals and teachers should be making the educational decisions.

OPTION #3 focuses on market forces. Parents should be able to choose the schools their children attend. Competition will serve to drive out poor schools and make good ones better.

OPTION #4 views education as a total community responsibility. Many resources outside the classroom should be tapped for learning opportunities.

Advocates of Option #1 believe that the way to start improving schools is to return to the principles that have proved successful in American businesses. In this view, more control from the top down, with management specialists making the decisions, will lead to the result we want — an education system that works.

Currently, some 25 percent of all American students drop out of school, a figure that soars to 50 percent in the inner cities. No American business could survive with the failure rate we have in our schools.

Successful businesses are run by people who understand and use accepted management techniques like setting goals, improving products, raising productivity, lowering costs, and satisfying customers. There is no reason schools cannot be improved by use of these techniques, say those who support this option.

OPTION #1:

A BUSINESS APPROACH

Should citizens impose successful business management policies on schools as a primary means of getting the educational results they want?

Establishing a more businesslike educational system calls for measures that will make educators accountable for what they produce — or fail to produce. As one politician says, "We spend $200 billion a year on education in this country without knowing what we are getting from our schools." Those who support Option #1 favor development of federal educational standards and a nationwide testing program to measure the progress of America's schoolchildren.

American education has to become more results-oriented, proponents of this option say. Above all, we must ask if students are learning what they need to know. And, we must make sure those who are being paid to educate our students are doing their jobs. Educators, according to this view, have been too involved in

developing theories about learning and not involved enough in developing practices that produce results.

Blame for the failure of our schools has been laid at virtually every doorstep: the government does not provide enough money; defaulting parents expect the schools to do their jobs; teachers do not teach properly; universities don't train teachers adequately; principals can't manage schools. But no one accepts the responsibility for making improvements.

Administrators with professional management skills are best suited to take on the responsibility, proponents of this view believe. We have to stop discussing various theories of how children learn and doing more studies of what's wrong, they say. It's time to get down to business. We must establish national education goals and hold those in the education profession accountable for meeting them.

Critics of Option #1 argue that its basic premise is wrong. In the first place, they say, schools are not businesses. What schools need is more public and professional input, not less. The public is footing the bill; it should have a say. Furthermore, opponents point out, children are not products. Standardized national testing is appropriate for identical cans of peas on an assembly line; it is not necessarily suitable for assessing the educational progress of children. Finally, critics say, successful child development demands great flexibility and nurturing care, not the methods of choice of American business management.

To advocates of a second view, the way to get the results we want is to turn education decisions over to the professionals — the teachers and principals. Currently, proponents of this option say, they are given little opportunity to do their jobs.

In China, fifth grade teachers spend an average of twelve hours a week teaching math. In Japan, teachers teach math eight hours a week. In the U.S. math is taught three hours a week.

These figures tell the story, advocates of Option #2 say. In this country, teachers are putting in plenty of time in the classroom, but they are not spending it teaching students. Much of their time is being siphoned off by demands and directions set by others.

OPTION #2:

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS

Should we turn educational decisions over to the professionals who interact daily with students — the teachers and the principals?

For example, many critical decisions are made by bureaucrats or political figures at the local and state levels. In this view, it is virtually impossible for school staff to implement their own ideas because systemwide or statewide rules prevent any departure from approved practices.

In addition, supporters of Option #2 point out, too many outside "experts" have their fingers in the pie. One retired District of Columbia teacher recalls 20 years of trying to implement new designs for education programs — all imposed by outside consultants, each requiring more paperwork, and none of them designed to make teachers teach academic subjects more fully to their students.

Finally, proponents of this view point out, educators have been increasingly saddled with the fallout from many of the social problems affecting the nation's children — neglect, poverty, teenage pregnancy, drug control. Every year, teachers and principals are asked to do more with fewer resources.

Improving our educational results is not an intractable problem. We know what works. The nation abounds with documented examples of excellence, and stories of failing schools that have been totally turned around. At the center of these success stories is always a teacher or a principal.

What that should tell us, say advocates of Option #2, is that to get the results we want, we must let the professionals regain control of the education system. Let teachers do what they do best — teach. And let principals do what they have been trained to do — run the schools. Let them do their jobs, and replace them if they fail to deliver.

Critics of this approach say that, in fact, they **have** failed to deliver. Teachers and principals have not been doing the job we want them to do. Opponents admit that there are many good teachers and principals. But, they say, there are also too many teachers who are not competent to teach. And, too often, principals are not good administrators. The results speak for themselves.

Furthermore, critics say, educational standards must be set above the school level; local professionals are too subject to local political pressure. Finally, critics of Option #2 aver, there is no use in complaining about societal pressures on schools. Schools are one of society's formative institutions; they have to deal with societal concerns.

This country's progress has been built on a market economy, driven by competitive forces that offer buyers the chance to select the best from a variety of options. Advocates of Option #3 argue that parents should be able to choose the schools they want their children to attend.

Central to this option is a conviction that allowing parents to shop around will improve the schools. Competition works in all other businesses by providing the impetus to produce better goods and services. Giving parents the right to choose from among various educational choices would force schools to become more effective, too. Or, it would force them to close.

OPTION #3:

MARKET FORCES

Should we institute the principles of a market economy — letting parents and children choose their schools — to achieve educational reform?

It worked in East Harlem. This inner-city school district posted the lowest test scores in New York City in 1972 when a new system of alternative or magnet schools was first introduced there. Some 24 of the district's junior high schools now offer specialized programs in such concentrations as biomedical careers, performing arts, or maritime skills. In 1972, only 15 percent of the students could read at grade level. By 1989, 48 percent were reading at grade level or above.

Competition forced the closing of three schools in East Harlem. But it pushed schools like the foundering Maritime School to improve by enriching its offerings. Now applications are increasing at the Maritime School and so is morale.

Choice has taken many forms. In Milwaukee, students from low-income families can get state funds to pay for tuition in nonsectarian private schools. In Washington, D.C., students citywide can apply to attend magnet schools that offer a variety of special concentrations.

Supporters of this market approach think the magnet school concept should be expanded. Magnets, they say, must be restrictive and limit their size. But, the types and numbers of magnets should increase to give parents and students many choices.

Some advocates of this view agree with a proposal made by Brookings Institution scholars John Chubb and Terry Moe that would combine public and private schools into a single entity and put the schools beyond the reach of politics and bureaucratic oversight. Each school that meets minimum requirements, as set by each state, would qualify for public money. Schools would determine their own governing structures, and would be held accountable only to the parents and students free to choose among them.

This kind of market control, say proponents of Option #3, is the only way to improve American education.

Critics view this approach as separatist and elitist. It would operate well for children whose parents have the wherewithal and the motivation to shop for the best schools. It would leave the rest worse off than ever. This approach would further erode the public school system by siphoning off much-needed funds, neighborhood energies, and the best students. Furthermore, opponents of this view say, all Americans are entitled to a quality education in their own communities. They pay taxes. They should not have to send their children across town to be sure of a good education.

Education should not be bounded by the four walls of the schoolhouse, say those who favor Option #4. The way to get the results we want, they maintain, is to engage the entire community in providing that education. Education is a community responsibility, and the community that becomes involved will benefit as much as the students do.

City-As-School is a New York City high school whose curriculum links students with thousands of learning experiences all over the city. Directors of the school say the many ways the community can teach students are as endless as the resources of the community. They include shopkeepers, physicians, civil servants, artists, and politicians, as well as civic, cultural, and political organizations. Students take field courses specifically designed for them and monitored by the professional staff at the school. They receive academic credit for each learning experience.

OPTION #4:

A COMMUNITY APPROACH

Is it possible to merge the interests of educators and the community so that education transcends the schoolroom and becomes a community responsibility?

In this view, the real-world context for education is as important as its content. Students working with a computer specialist at an Army base can learn more quickly and easily than in a school computer center, for example. Assisting a painter can be at least as valuable, if not more so, as learning art in the classroom.

Education is too important to leave to the political system, proponents of this option say. We ourselves, as members of our communities, must cooperate to provide the kind of education we want for our children. Citizens must become activists in achieving the education results they want, according to advocates of Option #4.

In this view it is important, too, to look past short-term goals such as higher test scores or greater numbers of graduates. What

we really want are achievements that enrich both the local community and the larger society. That, rather than SAT exams, is what we should be preparing our students for.

Advocates of this approach cite research findings by the Institute for Responsible Education (IRE) at Boston University. Improved linkages between school and community have many positive effects, according to IRE head, Don Davies. These include increased community access to school resources and facilities; cost savings and improved services achieved by school-community cooperation; increased capacity to solve community problems; and an upsurge in community pride.

Education is a continuing, cooperative process, those who support this option say. It must involve all of us to ensure the future of our community and our nation.

Critics of this option are skeptical. It sounds fine in theory, they say, but doubtful in practice. Relying on an entire community for long-term involvement is unrealistic. Furthermore, some critics say, we pay a lot of money to the state to provide public education that works. Community members should not be expected to step in and do the job where educators have failed. Community members do not have the necessary knowledge or training to educate children. Education is too important to be left to amateurs, opponents of this view point out.

By almost any educational measure, the nation's students are steadily losing ground. Increasing numbers leave school without acquiring basic skills and cannot find jobs. Most Americans have come to agree on the need for educational reform, but discussions in many communities have led to little consensus about what should be done.

This booklet has no new answers. Rather, it suggests some new questions designed to help communities reframe the debate. It offers four perspectives on the question of **who** should make the decisions about our schools.

CONCLUSION: MAKING A CHOICE ABOUT LEADERSHIP

- In one view, schools should be run by professional managers using management techniques that have proved successful in business. But, critics say, schools are not businesses and children are not products.
- A second approach is to let the professionals — teachers and principals — do what they have been trained to do: teach children and run the schools. Opponents point out, however, that, so far, professionals have not been getting the job done.
- Option #3 proposes an education "marketplace" in which parents can choose between alternative schools. Competition would improve good schools and drive out poor ones. Critics of this view say it is a formula for separatism and elitism.
- A fourth option revolves around the concept of the whole community as a "school," and emphasizes learning by doing. Skeptics say that though this might be a wonderful idea, it is impractical and unrealistic.

Each of these views holds some promise for improving our schools. Each also has costs. This booklet is designed to help people consider the trade-offs and come to some agreements about what should be done in their communities.

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NIF does not advocate any specific solution or point of view on public issues; rather, NIF seeks to provide a means by which citizens can work together productively, as a public, to influence public policymaking. Through NIF Forums and study circles, citizens have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the issues, to consider a broad range of policy choices, and to talk with each other to identify the concerns they share.

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The Promise of Democracy
David Mathews
President, Kettering Foundation