

# Excellence Reformers Need to Make a Choice

Fourth-grade test scores in reading and math continue to rise, reported Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings this past September in a well-designed press conference releasing the latest (2007) results from the nation's report card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). But 8th-grade scores are not keeping pace.

Though math scores are up a bit, reading scores have stagnated.

Though Secretary Spellings got the media attention she sought, the latest NAEP findings are hardly "news." For more than a decade, progress in elementary school achievement has not translated into comparable gains in middle and high school.

The results must be disappointing for those who have marched fervently under the excellence banner for the past 35 years. Back in 1982, the Reagan administration jump-started that parade by releasing its attention-getting report on the state of American education, *A Nation at Risk*.

To its credit, the excellence movement halted the steady slide in American education then taking place. But reformers did better at identifying what they wanted to achieve than defining a strategy for getting there. Instead of working out a battle plan, they wandered back and forth between two contradictory goals—choice and accountability.

On the one side, reformers sought to introduce more competition into American K–12 education through charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits. Andy Smarick (see "Wave of the Future," page 38) carries that idea to its logical conclusion by calling for the revamping of urban education through a comprehensive system of charter schools that go well beyond what even Paul Vallas is attempting in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Meanwhile, many embraced a not altogether compatible reform, school accountability, that has extended the regulatory control of the state and federal governments over public schools. By testing students, releasing the results to the public, and attaching rewards and sometimes a few weak sanctions to those results, accountability reformers have attempted to tighten the screws on local school boards, administrators, and classroom teachers. Once student performance was made

## Is accountability the reform of the past?

known, those in charge would turn the school ship aright, reformers thought.

Until now, accountability has trumped choice. Well before the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, many states launched accountability systems and, urged by the federal legislation, the rest are beginning to catch up. Accountability's edge

is undoubtedly due not only to widespread public support for the idea (see "What Americans Think about Their Schools," Fall 2007), but to the fact that, as practiced, it has posed only a minimal threat to the great vested interests of American education: local school boards, state departments of education, schools of education, and teacher unions. Even when headlines scream that students are doing badly, voters do not hold school board members to account, say William Howell and Christopher Berry (see "Accountability Lost," page 66).

Meanwhile, one has to scour the countryside to find sizable choice interventions. Charter schools, the most popular of them, now enroll but 3 percent of all public school students. Even worse, NCLB, far from unleashing major new choice initiatives as was originally hoped, is instead threatening the future of many struggling urban charter schools. The law's accountability standard expects schools serving the educationally disadvantaged to raise dismally low performance to full proficiency within an unreasonably short period of time. Charter schools, the one type of public school that is actually being held to account by authorizing bodies, are now threatened with closure if they don't perform to standards other public schools can safely ignore.

Yes, choice schools need to be held accountable. But that is best accomplished not through tighter, one-size-fits-all regulation, but through sensible performance measures and a dynamic marketplace for education in which new schools challenge the dominance of decaying ones, much as Smarick suggests.

Not everyone will agree that accountability is the reform of the past. But as the reauthorization deadline for NCLB draws nigh, it is time for the excellence movement to reassess its reform strategy.

— Paul E. Peterson

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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