
From Checker's Desk

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Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Who Says It's a Good School?

Important education insights sometimes arise from developments in other fields.

This happened to me twice in recent weeks. Both episodes bear on results-based accountability, how it works, what can go awry—and what's wrong with the usual substitutes.

First, a new study of hospital accreditation looked into whether it makes any difference for the quality of patient care. Note that 95 percent of U.S. hospital beds are in health care institutions accredited by the Joint Commission on Hospital Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. Researchers at the University of Michigan School of Public Health looked to see whether such accreditation is a good predictor of the safety and quality of health care, according to a January 14 *Wall Street Journal* article. (The study itself—a technically sophisticated bit of data analysis—appears in the winter 2001 issue of the journal *Quality Management in Health Care*.) After

studying 700 hospitals, they found that “even hospitals with higher-than-average rates of deaths and complications receive favorable scores” from the Joint Commission. No doubt that's related to the fact that the “commission almost exclusively relies on surveying a hospital's structure and processes to determine whether to accredit a hospital, and doesn't give any weight to performance measures such as the number of deaths or unexpected complications or the ability to adapt to the latest treatments.” In other words, the accreditors look at inputs, programs, and activities, not results.

Predictably, the Joint Commission fought back, insisting that—watch the nuanced words—“accreditation assures patients that a hospital ‘complies with a set of standards identified by health-care professionals as important things that lead to safety and quality and care.’”

Sound familiar? “Standards identified by professionals as important things that lead to” the desired results? Trust us experts. We oughtn't be judged

by what actually happens to patients. Judge us and our institutions by whether they do the things that we professionals believe contribute to the desired results.

This calls to mind the debates about whether teacher-training programs must be accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (which some states require), whether public school teachers themselves need to be licensed (which every state requires), and whether teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards should get extra pay and status on grounds that they're more effective (which more states are offering). In all these cases, the essential question is whether an inputs- and process-heavy evaluation system is a reliable way to assure satisfactory results.

When critics charge that such hoops, hurdles, input controls, and professional judgments do not correlate with actual institutional effectiveness or student achievement, they get told that education should be more like medicine or it will never be a true profession. How many times have I heard that "You wouldn't want your brain operated on by an unlicensed doctor; why let your child be taught by a non-certified teacher or one who went through an unaccredited preparation program?"

Well, now we know that accreditation doesn't amount to much in hospitals, either. And it isn't just a few isolated scholars saying this. Three years ago, the inspector general of the federal Department of Health and

Human Services also faulted the Joint Commission's accreditation system for "major deficiencies" and said its reviews are "unlikely to detect standard patterns of care or individual practitioners with questionable skills."

Second insight: As the Enron swamp deepens, we see that neither the company, nor its accountants at Arthur Andersen, nor sundry government oversight bodies did an acceptable job of protecting the public interest (which includes the interests of company shareholders and employees).

But what's the remedy? And how does it differ from our approach to failing schools? In business, Americans take for granted that government has little direct ownership and management role, and that private firms are the main actors. They're free to run themselves as they think best but not to keep secrets about how they're doing. Our economy depends not just on private ownership but also on a well-informed marketplace. Firms that are publicly traded must disclose all manner of financial and other information. Outside auditors are meant to keep the company treasurer honest and the stockholders informed. The accounting profession sets guidelines for how things are reported. And the government monitors and, when necessary, polices all this.

That system usually works fine. The economy thrives. Capitalism flourishes. And nobody proposes that the government should run the companies. In the Enron case, however, it broke down. People lied. What was disclosed wasn't the whole story. The accountants were,

evidently, complicit in the misbehavior. And government oversight bodies sat on their hands.

Recriminations are now flying, congressional hearings are under way, politics is heating up, and from all sides we hear a clamor for reform of the accounting profession and its standards. Indeed, that clamor shows how important accurate information is to our economy and what a challenge it is to design and sustain (and modernize) systems that ensure that the public has (and can trust) the information it needs. It's impossible to bar all chicanery, but we can do our best to create systems and rules that lead to the best data possible and to develop checks and balances that make it difficult for anyone to conceal the truth from the marketplace for long. Nobody doubts that government has a proper role in closing loopholes in reporting requirements and accounting practices that allow companies to mislead the public. (If Enron's questionable bookkeeping methods had been prohibited, we would have known far earlier about the company's problems and a lot of misery might have been averted.) But nobody, to my knowledge, has suggested that government should itself run—or replace—the companies themselves.

In K-12 education, on the other hand, we don't assume independent operation of schools in a marketplace supplied by government-mandated information. Rather, we assume direct government operation of the schools by state and local "systems." We settle for bureaucracy instead of public information. That's one reason we seldom

have good data about what's going on in individual schools or what results they're producing. Despite its flaws, American capitalism provides investors, customers, and outside watchdogs with tons more detailed information about companies than parents, teachers, or students have about their schools. In education, these data have traditionally been held close. Instead, we've been told that government operation of the schools will look after the public interest. We don't need to know much about how they're doing because supposedly we can trust the government to run them properly.

Then a few exceptions are made, such as charter schools, home schools, private schools, and outsourced public schools run by private firms.

Those exceptions don't always work well, to be sure. I've been to my share of bad charter schools, and the evidence is mixed on outsourcing. In education, though, people tend to assume that, if one of the exceptions isn't working, the remedy is to put government back in direct control of the situation, or at least to make more government rules apply to it. That's because education has no effective market to solve the problem. If it did, we would demand full information—and expect government to help us get that information—then let the market work its will. An Enron-like school would lose customers, file for educational bankruptcy, and probably shut down.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of the new federal No Child Left Behind law is its earnest efforts to force better information from the education system

via school report cards, “adequate yearly progress” reports at the building level, the disaggregation of test results, data on how many of a school’s teachers are “highly qualified” (and how many are teaching out-of-field, etc.), and other mechanisms. Taken as a whole, it makes a valiant start at getting education consumers (and practitioners) the kinds of data that investors and customers have long expected from the companies they deal with. In that way, *No Child Left Behind* begins to redefine government’s role in education, not just as bureaucratic overseer (though that’s still there, too) but also as a marketplace facilitator and honest broker of vital data.

What’s still missing in education, of course, is a true marketplace. That’s where the federal legislation wimps out. So we continue with an awkward hybrid, a basically bureaucratic accountability system onto which is heaped the kinds of consumer information that would be needed by a market-style accountability system. One hopes we’ll get that sorted out in the years to come.

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What to Do about Education in the Islamic World?

The problem is now well established. The question is whether any solutions are in sight.

To recap the challenge: Millions of young Muslims are receiving a bad education from the public and private schools of such countries as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, one that bears scant resemblance to a modern,

liberal arts curriculum in science, geography, and civics, much less “critical thinking.” It doesn’t teach youngsters about Newton, Einstein, or Jefferson, the voyages of Captain Cook, the backdrop and aftermath of the French revolution, the glories of Aztec civilization, or the literature of Dickens. Rather, it’s an education in religious fundamentalism and little more, except for hatred of Christians, Jews, and the United States.

Much of this occurs in Islamic religious schools that have an essentially medieval curriculum, leavened by doses of modern-style “jihad” against infidels. Because public education has more or less collapsed in some countries, and because the “madrasas” are inexpensive or free, this is the only kind of schooling to which millions of impoverished Muslim boys (and a few girls) have access.

In other nations, the curriculum of hatred is imparted directly by government schools. The royal family of Saudi Arabia, for example, seems to have given over that country’s public education system to fundamentalist religious leaders.

So long as this situation persists, the Western world must expect a ceaseless flood of young recruits for terrorism in the name of Islam.

The challenge, therefore, is clear: Can the Western world do anything to alter the kind of education being received by these millions of young people?

It surely won’t be easy. The very idea will strike some as arrogant and imperialistic. (Fancy Indonesia seeking

to influence what's taught in American or Belgian schools.) The tools and resources available to us are few and weak compared with the challenge of altering the educational arrangements of other countries.

But the threat is so great that we must surely begin to think purposefully about ways to nip it in the bud. I can think of seven possible strategies. None is ideal, none is cheap, none is certain to succeed. In combination, however, they might make a difference.

First, sizable chunks of conventional foreign aid to other countries could be focused on the creation and operation of different kinds of public schools, on training or retraining their teachers, on developing curricula for them, and so forth. Foreign aid is typically intergovernmental, whether the money originates in the U.S. federal budget or in joint ventures by various donor countries. It may also come from multilateral organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank. The U.S. government has considerable influence over much of this, and could have more if it were clever and persistent. But recipient governments must be willing to cooperate, for such aid normally passes through them or is expended with their oversight.

Second, the United States and other Western nations could apply a "tough love" approach to their other (noneducation) foreign aid to Islamic countries, as well as to such international goodies as lower tariff barriers, acceptance into trade organizations, supportive votes at the United Nations, technology transfers, and so

on, conditioning all such beneficent acts on recipient nations' commitment to do something about their children's education.

Third, there are many ways of encouraging nongovernment schools in other countries via private philanthropy, international groups, and commercial opportunism. What a terrific moment for major private donors (the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, for example) to foster the creation of "modern" schools that would operate for free or at minimal cost to their students. Economist James Tooley has found low-budget private schools that function successfully in third-world countries for just a few dollars per child per month. There is no reason that thousands more could not come into being. Moreover, the Western world boasts privately operated schools (e.g., Edison's) that could be exported, albeit at greater per-pupil cost. (Maybe Chris Whittle would like to establish some model schools in Islamabad, Riyadh, and Kuala Lumpur.) Many Islamic countries already have international-class private schools—often founded in colonial times—for their elites. With some financial assistance, perhaps these schools might be prevailed upon to expand or clone themselves for the education of nonelites.

Fourth, the Western world could develop and export low-cost textbooks, teacher manuals, and other instructional materials for schools in Islamic lands, written in Arabic or other vernacular languages but containing modern content. Whether commercial or philanthropic, these could meet one of

the foremost needs of any struggling education system: high-quality content suitable for teachers and students to use. The content is crucial: we read that Palestinian youngsters, for example, are routinely taught from anti-Semitic textbooks.

Fifth, schools are not the only means of transmitting education to children today. Let's also consider the "virtual" opportunities. Though necessarily limited by access to technology, lessons could be transmitted by radio through the Voice of America (or brand-new ventures created for this purpose) or over the Internet. Today's many makers of Web-based learning for American children might—especially if they're paid to do this by government or philanthropy—turn their attention to the adaptation and translation of such lessons for youngsters in the Muslim world.

Sixth, even as we guard our borders, we might bring more students and teachers to study in our schools and universities. (Better to learn civics and algebra than how to fly large planes!) Developing different attitudes toward the West is not, after all, just a matter of cognition. It also involves attitudes and experiences.

Finally, we can send Americans abroad to teach, run schools, advise ministries of education and suchlike, through the Peace Corps expansion that President Bush has proposed and through other governmental and private volunteer programs.

The problem is clear. It's time to get serious about finding some solutions.

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