Sizing Up the Competition

Competition can send us in many directions. It can trigger our defense mechanisms and raise our levels of anxiety about the future. But competition also can lead us to see more clearly who we are, sharpen our definition of what makes us strong and unique, and help us arrive at the point where we find new opportunities to compete. But that’s not always an easy point to reach.

In recent years, public schools have faced a steady stream of competition in the form of vouchers, charter schools, for-profit management companies, private schools, and home schooling. In many cases, public schools are portrayed as a cumbersome, age-old monopoly facing a spry new rival. It’s easy to feel rankled when you’re constantly reading reports of your impending demise.

However, during the past decade or so we’ve watched these alternatives face many of the daunting challenges with which public schools long have wrestled and produce similar results: a few spectacular successes, some worthy progress, some mediocrity, and some downright failure.

Facing such competition should bring us around to realizing what’s most important about our public schools: that they are vital community centers for teaching and learning, ready to adapt to the new challenges and changing demands of a modern world.

Don’t Be Distracted

Public schools serve 90 percent of our nation’s children—a number that hasn’t changed much over time. Too often, however, alternatives to public education take time and attention away from the real issues of making sure public schools are becoming better places for kids to learn and grow. Principals need to make sure they don’t fall prey to that kind of distraction. Even more important, principals need to make sure the public and policy-makers don’t get so swept up in new issues or alternatives that they overlook the needs of students in public schools.

We should learn from the attention to these alternatives—often born out of frustration or a desire for better education outcomes—in order to understand what’s driving the push for new paths in education. This is a big country with a multitude of ideas for addressing what kids need, and we should respect people looking for better ways. As an association, we’ve recognized that there is a place for choice among schools within the public system. This approach ensures that innovative options are available within the system, without diverting the resources needed to run good schools.

Aside from supporting new systems for delivering public education, our perspective on competitive alternatives impacts how we view accountability systems enacted by states in accordance with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Accountability is important and we’ve tried to alert the public to the reality that, over time, more and more schools will be unable to meet the challenges of NCLB’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets.

And yet, we don’t see large numbers of families opting out of schools because they’re not meeting AYP. Many people realize their children’s schools are working hard to improve, and they would rather be part of that process than hitting the eject button. We hope to make progress soon on improving the way NCLB measures accountability. In the meantime, we should stand with parents who are ready to roll up their sleeves and work for school improvement instead of moving their kids across town.

Stand Up for Your School

The biggest threat to public schools may not be a rival system, but simple indifference. There are a disturbing number of signs that, as a nation, our sense of doing things or making sacrifices for what we call “the common good” is eroding. We keep hearing that we’re becoming a nation of people just looking out for individual well-being.

Our Leading Learning Communities guide indicates that today’s principals need a sense of responsibility that reaches beyond the schoolhouse. We need to show more people the important work going on in our schools. People take care of things they know and love, and public schools are one of them.
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