

FINAL THOUGHTS

CHAPTER 9

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE STATE: ACCOUNTABILITY AND LARGE-SCALE SYSTEMIC REFORM

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The state of Florida has been actively engaged for several decades now in attempting to upgrade the quality of its public schools. Immediately after World War II, in 1947, it launched an ambitious program to increase overall funding for public schools, to increase the state's role in educational funding, to equalize spending across districts and to equalize spending between schools serving majority and minority students. It attempted to improve the quality of schools by requiring districts to extend the school year to 180 days, raising the teacher salary schedule, and employing master teachers to supervise instruction. The intervening 50 years has seen the state continue to wrestle with the same issues of how to ensure quality, maintain equity, and stimulate improvement.

The Florida of 1947 is barely recognizable in the Florida of 2000. Yet as the state has grown larger, its population more diverse, and education more crucial to the economic and social life of the state, the fundamental parameters of the debate have remained unchanged. What is the responsibility of the state to provide an educational system for its citizens? How can this responsibility best be met?

This book has attempted to shed light on these questions and in doing so has illustrated how difficult the enterprise and elusive the solutions. The chapter by Burnette, Herrington and Johnson documents the disappointing performance of Florida students on state and national assessments and the even more disturbing gap in achievement between minority and White students. On the other hand, a number of the chapters

suggest that if properly designed, state policies can result in significant system improvements and can be well received by local educators.

The chapter by Dawson, Swain and Baumbach records a two-decade long sustained commitment by the state to invest in educational technology. As a result, Florida has emerged as a national leader in this area. McGill-Franzen's chapter on the Florida Reading Initiative concludes with an equally positive assessment of the capacity of state policy to support meaningful reform in one area. She concludes her chapter stating that "Analysis of the responses of teachers at all levels—the district, school, and classroom levels—suggested that there has been a fortuitous coming together of policy and the collective will to achieve the policy." As portrayed in these two chapters, the state appears to be successful in pursuing educational reform in instances where there is a long-term commitment to a particular area or, even in the short-term, where there is a correspondence between state and local policy objectives.

But these circumstances do not obtain often enough. The state's predominant educational reform strategy, that of accountability (see Herrington and MacDonald in Chapter 1 of this book) is plagued with conflicts. As argued by both Wolcott and Inman in their respective chapters, accountability-based reforms contain serious weaknesses. According to Wolcott, the state assessments face significant technical, psychometric, instructional and administrative problems as yet unresolved. Inman also reports that the accountability framework, at least in its most recent incarnation, the A+ Plan, has been overwhelmingly denounced by educators and accused of being punitive to students and teachers alike.

The fact of the matter is, despite years of intense state focus on educational improvement, the state still has little to rely on for guidance as it selects from various educational policy alternatives. The policymaking process is fractured and the results are often hit or miss. The empirical analyses undertaken by Nyhan in the chapter on class size reduction illustrates the uncertain relation between many state policy choices and desired outcomes. His research questions the efficacy of class size reduction, a hugely expensive intervention in which Florida has invested

heavily. His research provides even less support for the assumption that expenditure increases, per se, increase student achievement.

In fact, extensive and more detailed analyses are required before any educational decisions can be safely based on any one line of research. As Nyhan notes, some of his research affirms, some refutes, the findings of other investigators. The research method he utilizes, a regression-based production model, is not universally accepted. Additional information could be derived if the same analyses were repeated, the second time using individual student data instead of aggregated school-level data. For the state to receive the full benefit from educational research, an ongoing program of considerable scale is required. One set of analyses, one line of inquiry, and one set of experiments are insufficient foundation for policymaking. However, a large-scale program of research in which the results of many investigations are reviewed—one in which competing lines of inquiry are pursued and multiple interventions are played out in experimental settings—could yield considerable benefits.

The search in Florida for an appropriate role for the state has been clouded by the lack of clear, research-supported knowledge concerning “what works” in increasing student achievement. Policy makers in Florida have fallen upon accountability as its primary reform strategy for almost 30 years now because, in the absence of solid information on “what works,” the role of setting standards, measuring performance and establishing consequences has been the best alternative. This approach retains political legitimacy, is administratively feasible and provides useful information to guide improvement.

The search for accountability has been the result of the state policy makers trying to meet their obligation as the responsible agents for public education while at the same time, realizing that their knowledge is too incomplete and their levers for action too blunt to effectively drive large-scale improvements. In the final analysis, policy makers find themselves in a series of policy cul-de-sacs; significant improvements in student achievement have not been realized, and yet they have been unable to define another, equally legitimate role for the state.

State policy makers clearly do not believe they can fulfill their obligation to the Florida Constitution or to the citizens of Florida by merely establishing educational programs and providing funding for them. At the same time, policy makers recognize that they cannot run the programs. Florida policy makers have taken the responsibility of oversight seriously and have grappled with the means to design oversight systems that are effective without being a burden. They have tried to devise consequences that reward high performance and discourage low performance. What they have not managed to do is design a system that translates the information derived by the oversight function into a continuous process that dramatically improves performance.

Accountability is the most critical role for the state to play. However, the role needs to be further expanded. *Accountability must become a means to enhance capacity as well as a vehicle for assessing effectiveness.* This further purpose was part and parcel of the recommendations of the 1973 report of the Governor's Citizens' Committee on Education and has never been enacted. Currently, Florida's accountability framework uses student achievement information for two purposes: reporting to the public on the effectiveness of schooling and providing guidance at the school and district level for planning and improvements. A third role is critical for real reform to take place. The accountability system should drive research on the design and development of significantly more powerful learning systems.

State educational reform will continue to be episodic and incremental in design and uncertain in effect unless state policy makers anchor their efforts in a solid process of research and development. Small-scale school-by-school reform efforts will never yield powerful increases in student learning. Branson, in this volume, argues that a state investment equal to the costs of one day of public schooling would be an appropriate level of initial investment. This type of commitment is not without precedent in either education or the public sector. The state has invested heavily in research and development in the agricultural sector with well-documented results. Other countries, notably the Republic of Korea, have

invested in educational research and development with equally well-documented results. The public sector can not presume to escape the costs of research and development. It will not be cheap but it cannot be avoided.

A state-sponsored research and development capacity along the lines sketched by Branson in Chapter 8 is required. It should be programmatic in design, broad in scope and scale, and systemic in impact. It should be an adjunct to, not a replacement of, the other components of the state's accountability framework—standards, assessments, public reporting, and consequences for high and low performance. It should also stand in support of—not in place of—planning and management responsibilities of schools and districts. Taken as a whole, this new and enhanced accountability framework offers the best promise for a high performing and responsive public school system. Under this framework, the state has a role in educational improvement that is both legitimate and effective—and powerful enough to support Florida's schools as they strive to meet the performance requirements of a new century.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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