

School choice: If you don't tell, will they ask?

By Stephen Adams

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Critics are giving the federal law known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) quite a workout. This nearly three-year old law seeks to introduce a small dose of competition into public education to encourage schools to improve their performance in educating their charges. Under the act, parents of children in poorly-performing schools can receive supplemental special services, like tutoring, from private providers. If a school fails to improve over time, these parents can, theoretically, send their children to better performing schools in the same school district.

Critics are hitting NCLB from all sides. Those who oppose competition and resist holding schools accountable complain that the law is under funded, that standardized testing is ineffective and unfair, and that public dollars are being diverted to private providers of supplemental services. Others say the law doesn't go far enough in shifting federal dollars from failing schools to successful schools, doesn't give parents real choices and simply maintains the status quo.

There is some truth to all of these criticisms. Indeed, if measured only by how many parents are taking advantage of NCLB's benefits, the law is an abject failure.

According to a new Pioneer Institute study, authored by Harvard University's William Howell, just 0.3 percent of the 95,458 Massachusetts students eligible for NCLB benefits last year took advantage of them. Howell's analysis helps explain why by examining what parents know about their educational options. A Pioneer survey of 1,000 parents in the state's 10 largest school districts provides a detailed look at parental knowledge of NCLB. Survey results suggest that most parents know something about NCLB, but that the parents who need to know, don't know enough. Moreover, those responsible for informing parents, have little incentive to do so.

Parents of children in underperforming schools are more likely to know about NCLB and its choice provisions than those with children in performing schools. Whether it's through the news media or talking to friends and neighbors, parents in failing schools have heard about NCLB and the choices it offers eligible families.

In principle, it makes choices available to parents, but they are not automatic. Parents of eligible children have to ask for supplemental services or the right to send their child to a different school, and there's the rub. According to the survey, while parents of children in underperforming schools are more likely to know about the law, they are less likely to know that they qualify.

State law requires only underperforming schools to report their status. Yet, nearly 60 percent of parents of children in performing schools know their school's status while only one in three parents in underperforming schools know their school is on the list. As Howell explains, "those who thrive in the existing system have the information required to realize that NCLB will not help them any further, while those who struggle lack the information required to explore new schooling options that might improve their lot."

This lack of knowledge points to a major flaw in NCLB. NCLB charges failing schools with alerting parents to the school's bad performance; the official source of information about a school's performance is the school itself.

Some schools are making legitimate efforts to keep parents informed with clearly-written letters reporting their school's status and outlining parents' options. But many are burying results in the middle of communications filled with glowing reports on other aspects of their child's school.

The federal law tells parents "if you can discover that you are eligible, you may have some choices." Then it puts control of the information and the choices into the hands of the institutions with the least incentive to disclose the facts.

It turns out that poorly performing public schools have reason to worry. Survey results show that parents with children in underperforming schools are twice as likely to be interested in switching schools, whether or not they know their school is on the underperforming list.

These parents are fully capable of making good decisions for their children. They can assess the quality of education their child's school and they can identify better alternatives, even if they cannot access them. Competition and accountability can drive improvement in public schools, but only if parents are able to vote with their feet. If low- and moderate-income parents are given accurate information and legitimate choices, they will ensure that their children get the best education available to them.

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