

Response to “Random Acts of Reform”

Thanks for the chance to review your [draft] article on education reform. The piece was accurate and engaging and I learned a lot! The section on charter schools—the topic addressed that I know the most about—appeared right on the money to me.

Though I’ll provide a few editorial comments below, I mainly wanted to raise a question about the article’s overall theme, that school reform in N.C. has been “random” or “stop and go.”

Overall, I think you tend to exaggerate how random the evolution of education policy has been in North Carolina. You lay out these 10 reforms in chronological sequence, with the implication that these were 10 successive, comprehensive efforts to improve schools, each of which has been thrown by the wayside in order to make way for the next reform.

My reading of history is a little bit different. Education, like most policy domains, is a complex endeavor, with a lot going on. In any state, I would *hope* to see many reform efforts running at once, addressing different elements of this complex system. Some of the reforms you trace aim to improve teacher quality (the Career Ladder Program and the Excellent Schools Act); others aim to set forth what students should know, how they and their schools should be evaluated, and where power should lie (i.e. the Basic Education Plan, Senate Bill 2, and the Accountability, Basics, and Control, or ABC Program); others aim at school finance equity (Low-Wealth and Small School funds and the BEP to a lesser extent); the rest are less wide-ranging, trying to do more specific things like lengthen the school year or give families more choice. It’s really not the case that each of these reforms superseded or replaced the last.

Within these strands there’s certainly been some stop and go. The BEP/Senate Bill 2/ABC progression is one example. But you acknowledge that there have been certain threads of continuity within that progression, as state policymakers grappled with exactly what standards to apply, what curriculum to mandate, how to test students and evaluate schools, and how to allocate control. This history looks to me more like Charles Lindblom’s famous “muddling along,” with incremental efforts to do better, than wholesale replacement of one reform with the next. Though I believe the current accountability system is far from perfect, I don’t think stop and go policymaking is necessarily the culprit.

Within the teacher quality strand, it’s easier to see the Excellent Schools Act as a complete departure from the Career Ladder Program. But it seems clear that the Career Ladder Program was a failure, and surely states should scrap reforms that aren’t working well, even at the risk of introducing instability.

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