

Quality Control in a Dynamic Sector

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The old, bureaucratic model of public schooling came with its own versions of quality control (QC), mostly of the old, bureaucratic sort. If those were effective, we would have less angst today over the performance of American K-12 education and would not be trying so many different schemes to reform, renew and reinvent it. In reality, however, traditional approaches to QC have not been very effective in assuring high-quality performance from traditional education providers. In fact, they resemble China's approach to quality control of its exports. (Unlike the Chinese, however, we have not, to my knowledge, executed anyone as a symbolic show of our discontent.)

The old QC model was built for an education system that lacked good data on student performance and academic outcomes, one that presupposed that educators were state (or district) employees governed by an oligopoly with plenty of regulations, and one in which the monitoring of inputs was assumed to be both efficient and equitable. In other words, the QC arrangements were part of the "one best system" that characterized U.S. public education during most of the twentieth century. Today, however, given new tools, a flood of outcomes data, clearer understanding of the shaky relationship between school inputs and academic results, and widespread discontent with the latter, we are able—indeed, we are obliged—to rethink QC for American primary and secondary education.

Because U.S. education lacks the quality it wants and is not delivering the results it needs, for at least the past two decades we have been attempting to revitalize it. These attempts take too many forms to catalog here. But prominent among them today, and getting more so, is entrepreneurship: the entry of new participants, providers and models for K-12 education. In addition to cookie-cutter schools operated in bureaucratic fashion by a state near-monopoly that is regulated, standardized and homogenized in a hundred different ways, America is more open

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than ever to alternative sources of schooling, school designs, curricula, instructional materials, technology, governance arrangements, financing, even personnel. Some of these entrepreneurial entrants are profit-seekers, some are non-profit but private, some are governmental. But they are proliferating, experimenting, competing, often boasting, and certainly absorbing vast sums of money—though never as much as they would like.

For three compelling reasons, however, we are not prepared simply to turn them loose in the marketplace to forage for themselves. First, children are involved, and society is obligated to safeguard their welfare. Second, for the most part, public dollars are involved, and sound fiscal practice calls for steps to ensure that these are not wasted, much less stolen. (The cost effectiveness of new programs and interventions may not matter greatly to parents who spend “free money” on public education, but it matters greatly to providers, public officials and taxpayers.) Third, because the backdrop to all this activity is discontent with the performance of old-style public education, new models are of value—and the hassles, tussles and risks associated with putting them into place are worth enduring—primarily to the extent that they yield better performance, which needs to be determined by suitable metrics and comparisons.

Yes, you could say those same three conditions also apply to traditional public education in today’s context and thus explain why today’s schools are enmeshed in so dense a “quality control” web of precautionary, regulatory, bureaucratic and accountability schemes and thereby deterred from innovating on their own. And you would be at least partly correct.¹ Indeed, if we trap the new entrepreneurs in that same web, we can be pretty sure they will not be able to do much differently or better. If, on the other hand, we have no QC, then the three anxieties noted above will be inflamed.

So the question arises: can we think differently about quality control with respect to K-12 education's entrepreneurial sectors and new entrants, attending to the welfare of children and the taxpayer's dollar, as well as academic performance (and other important school outcomes), without stifling innovation and scaring off innovators? Or will this goose be strangled before we can determine whether any of its eggs contain gold?

Plenty of would-be stranglers lurk by the roadside, both those that want to kill off entrepreneurial competition to the traditional providers of K-12 education and those that simply cannot imagine fresh approaches to quality control. Yet if we truly make it easier for unfamiliar people and organizations to flow into K-12 education, to start new things and change familiar practices, it would be absurd to be dynamic on one side of the equation, and bureaucratic and inflexible on the other. Still, we do not want entrepreneurs rifling public funds to pay for goods and services and models that do not work (even if they pad the entrepreneur's bankroll or burnish its reputation). Unfettered markets also carry costs and risks (e.g. harm to innocent youngsters) that society will refuse to pay. Nor is casting off the fetters and letting it all rip a good long-term environment for nurturing entrepreneurialism in education. Since eagle-eyed, politically-powerful and media-savvy defenders of the present system will noisily publicize every single cost, failure, even hiccup in the entrepreneurial sector, those who believe that sector has something to offer American education need to be smart—and pro-active—on the QC front.

Education Quality Control, Old and New

Historically, *private* schools and their operators have had their quality controlled almost entirely by the marketplace—and all of the usual dynamics prevail there for good and for ill: word of mouth, reputation, hearsay, advertising, family custom, price, ability to raise money (philanthropy or, in the case of profit-seeking private schools, investors), geographic

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convenience, etc. Nearly every state insists on a license before one can operate a school, and in a few places those requirements are fairly stringent. In most states, however, they are easily met. On the other hand, many private schools feel it is important (if only for marketing purposes) to be “accredited” which means they are also subject to the rather more onerous (and conformity-inducing) quality ideas of private accrediting organizations.

By contrast, traditional *public* schools historically had what passed for quality control carried out via a thicket of government regulations and licensure requirements for schools, teachers and other staff. Many also take part in state or private accreditation. At the district level, the central office bureaucracy controls many school decisions (e.g. budget, personnel assignments) and monitors their compliance, later to be double-checked by auditors. In many jurisdictions, textbooks and other classroom items are subject to separate state approval processes. And, of course, in public and private schools alike, certain generic “control” mechanisms operate (e.g. fire and safety norms for buildings, licensure for bus drivers and school nurses) and specific goods—such as cafeteria food—are subject to their own regulatory processes.

Oversimplifying, we might label yesterday’s QC model “Regulating Inputs & Process” or RIP, and we might term the one we need today “Producing Academic Results Efficiently and Safely” or PARES. Both are concerned with the welfare of children and the integrity of public resources, but RIP paid scant attention to effectiveness (denominated primarily in terms of academic achievement). This is partly because there were few sure ways to monitor results, partly because policing processes and resources is how any bureaucratic near-monopoly instinctively approaches QC, and partly because RIP dates to the pre-Coleman-Report era when

educators sublimely assumed that proper management of sufficient inputs would yield acceptable outcomes.

PARES, by contrast, needs to address today's demand for stronger academic performance (and the narrowing of gaps), the entry of multiple providers, and our keen awareness that the path from intentions and resources to results is far twistier than previously recognized.

PARES also has to be more versatile because its users have varying QC needs and make different demands. For example, a district considering whether to outsource its HR operation to The New Teacher Project will be interested in very different performance metrics than will parents comparing schools for their children or monitoring the quality of teachers within a school. RIP really had just one client and could rely on one approach. But PARES may turn out to require multiple QC mechanisms for different purposes and users. It probably also calls for different data. Note that conventional discussions of education data assume the current delivery system; re-conceiving quality control so that it is better suited to the needs and idiosyncrasies of a more diversified and entrepreneurial system means that we must uncouple ourselves from habits of mind that have become reflexive in the mostly-monolithic, top-down systems of the NCLB era.

The Charter School Lesson

Until relatively recently, quality control throughout public education concentrated on RIP-style “inputs” and was little affected by market forces or school results. But the near-simultaneous arrival of market-driven public schools (e.g. charters, magnets) and standards-testing-accountability regimens has forced our sense of the quality of public schooling to be influenced by parent choices and test scores, that is, to deviate from (or at least augment) the old RIP model. NCLB has made that vivid for district-operated schools—both the test-score part

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and, to a lesser extent, the choice part. But the charter school example is still more instructive because these new schools are subject to both sets of forces, as well as compliance with sundry RIP-style laws and regulations that bear on them along with district-run schools. Though nobody would contend that today's charter universe exemplifies effective quality control in action, one could fairly say that charter schools, at least in theory, are subject to more QC forces than either traditional district schools or private schools. This is particularly relevant because charters are also one of the most dynamic sectors of K-12 education, the main doorway through which new school operators have been able to gain entry.

The spread of "market-based" education reform has not, however, done a good job of integrating Adam Smith's market mechanisms with illuminating and well-tailored school performance indicators or academic-quality gauges. It has, for example, relied on assessments keyed to fixed state standards, the results of which may be useful for state accountability purposes but tell consumers little about whether a given school is effective with its pupils. Heavy reliance on K-8 math and reading assessments to measure performance, and the paucity of other systematic metrics, also mean that families have scant information to inform their choices among schools and must therefore rely largely on inputs (e.g. pupil-teacher ratios) and school-generated razzle-dazzle. (If, by contrast, one is shopping for a new car, one can turn to multiple sources for trustworthy comparative information on various models' price, mileage, safety, trunk capacity, handling, reliability, resale value and much more.) Private organizations and state agencies that have promoted school choice have invested in giving parents pamphlets and making them aware they have "choices," but have not matched this investment with an aggressive effort to build good QC metrics or cultivate better information sources.

Charters thus illustrate the frailties of today's QC arrangements in K-12 education. The market works imperfectly but so does the top-down, results-based, standards-driven accountability system that charters (primarily via their authorizers) are subject to. On the one hand, many parents, perhaps because they are ill-informed, perhaps because they are easily satisfied, continue sending their daughters and sons to mediocre charter schools rather than trading up to those with stronger academic track records. On the other hand, NCLB and state testing systems yield plenty of proof that some charters are delivering abysmal results, yet nothing much is done by public authorities to change (much less close) them. One can lay a good share of this blame at the door of charter authorizers, who are more apt to police their schools' RIP-style compliance than their academic effectiveness and who are reluctant (and perhaps incompetent) when it comes to putting low-performing schools on probation or shutting them down. (Fiscal mismanagement is more apt to trigger such draconian steps.)

What leads charter authorizers to provide weak-kneed QC? Are there programmatic or structural alterations that would render them more effective? Consider the extent to which authorizers feel pressure—political, economic, civic, even racial—to open more schools and how little incentive they have to police entry in rigorous fashion. In fairness, a few authorizers have done a fine job of this, oftentimes because they had relatively few charters to give out and thus greater need to select carefully among would-be school operators. But especially in the early days of the charter movement, getting schools opened seemed more important to most authorizers than ensuring their future quality—and many of those same authorizers had little expertise by which to make informed judgments in the first place.

One ought not be surprised that such expertise is scarce, given the inherent difficulty of determining *in advance* what will be a good school, and doing so based largely on information

contained in a paper proposal. That is not too different from staring into pigeon entrails to foresee one's future. Indeed, we may even need to question whether initial authorization of a school *can* provide rigorous and reliable quality control. Perhaps the renewal of a school's charter rather than its initial granting is the true QC checkpoint. But that is problematic, too, due to the political pressures that inevitably bear upon sponsors weighing non-renewal of a popular but low-performing school.

I am well aware that charter school doctrine puts enormous stock in the wisdom, perspicacity and courage of high-quality authorizers, and in its work in Ohio my own foundation strives to behave that way. But our on-the-ground experience in the Buckeye State also underscores both the difficulty and the rarity of such sponsorship practice. So does much evidence from the business world and research conducted therein as to the difficulty of predicting in advance which start-ups will succeed. (Business has less trouble than education and other public-sector fields in bidding adieu to the failures.)

The Blooming, Buzzing World of Educational Entrepreneurship

Charter schools are by no means the full story of entrepreneurialism in American education circa 2007. Innovation and enterprise come in many forms, but five categories embrace most of them:

- Providers of specific goods and services. These include a host of non-instructional items such as pupil transportation, technology, data management, food services, laundry, and building maintenance. Increasingly, they also include professional services such as counseling, school psychology, school health care, library items (and operations), social work, pupil personnel services (e.g. attendance), school security, and professional development for school staff.
- Providers of new instructional materials, pedagogies, assessments, and such: publishers, media firms, testing companies, curriculum vendors, virtual schools and home schoolers (e.g. SchoolNet, K12, Connections Academy). Some specialize in school report cards for educators, policymakers and parents (e.g. GreatSchools.net, Just For the Kids). Other recent arrivals tutor kids (countless SES providers) and deliver "outsourced" subjects (e.g. on-line APEX courses).

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- Providers of new people in teaching and school-leader roles, such as Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, The New Teacher Project, and their regional, state and local counterparts.
- Firms and organizations that serve as expert advisors, turnaround specialists, management consultants and suchlike. These range from classic all-purpose consulting firms (McKinsey) to non-profit specialists (Bridgespan) to a host of even more specialized “school doctors” like the Center for Performance Assessment, Virginia’s School Turnaround Specialist program and the American Institutes for Research’s School District Consulting Practice.
- And, of course, entities that run whole schools, ranging from one-off (“mom and pop”) charter operators to state and national organizations like Green Dot, National Heritage Academies, Aspire Schools, Edison, Modern Red Schoolhouse and KIPP.

Some organizations have varied product lines. Edison Schools’ website, for example, lists five main services that span at least three and maybe four of the categories above. The Success for All Foundation also cuts across multiple categories, as do Catapult Learning, (Stanley) Kaplan and a host of other diversified for-profit and non-profit organizations. (Some also go beyond K-12 education to include pre-school and college-related programs and services.)

That is a lot of actors in many roles in numerous education dramas. How does anyone know which of them are any good? Effective? Safe for kids? Offering value for money? Which to choose for one’s state, one’s school, one’s child, one’s new curriculum? They are all at least somewhat self-interested; eager to grow, to polish their reputations, to make money, to educate more kids, to propagate their ideas, whatever. All will naturally put their best sides forward, making claims intended to persuade others to participate or purchase or permit. All will understate their shortcomings, inadequacies and unevennesses. That is true in every field and must be expected in this one. (It is also true of conventional public school systems. Thus Dr. John Cannell’s “Lake Wobegon” report of two decades back and today’s tendency for states to fiddle with their standards, tests and accountability regimens to make more kids appear “proficient.”)

What sort of new-style quality-control system could education use that would foster entrepreneurship and innovation while protecting the public's several interests here? The answer surely begins with realization that not everything can fruitfully be shoved under the same QC regime or judged in exactly the same way. QC doesn't necessarily lead to simple "yes-no" decisions; often it serves to ensure a floor on product quality, then to provide consumers with guidance to help them determine how the prices of various options (above that floor) match their marginal utility for that particular product or service. For example, *Consumer Reports* often suggests "best buys" in several price ranges; whether you think the \$4000 or the \$1500 flat-screen TV is a "best buy" for you will depend on your budget, how fussy you are, and how important the extra features are to you. There is a parallel here for, say, a superintendent trying to choose between rival custodial services, alternative math curricula or Title I tutoring firms. It is different, though, in the case of parents selecting among public-school options; their out-of-pocket costs will be identical—zero—and their decisions about "best in category" will instead rest on such school factors as reputation, convenience, size, course and extra-curricular offerings, maybe even academic performance.

Some QC strategies work better for some goods and services, in some contexts, and for some users, than for others. Apples-and-oranges problems are common in a field as multi-faceted as K-12 education. The criteria one might use in appraising providers of in-service training for primary teachers, for example, are likely to be sharply different from those one would use in determining which on-line calculus course to bring into one's high school or which charter school to send one's children to. A diversified firm that offers, say, both SES math-tutoring services for sixth graders and data management systems for superintendents' offices deserves to have its product lines examined in very different ways.

This is illustrated in table 1, which distinguishes two kinds of “demand” for QC information (consumer-style and government-style) and two levels of ease in obtaining reliable information on which to base decisions.

Table 1: Education Quality-Control Metrics

	Basis for Informed Private Choices (retail)	Basis for Government Decisions (wholesale, mainly)
Relatively easy to quantify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is this school accredited? ▪ Which states have regulatory and fiscal environments in which my EMO can thrive? ▪ Which of these schools made “adequate yearly progress” last year? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A school’s performance vis-à-vis state academic standards ▪ Financial stability of SES provider ▪ Performance of CMO in other states ▪ Did this reading program pass muster with the What Works Clearinghouse?
Difficult to measure objectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Which teachers in this school are most effective? ▪ Suitability of a given school for one’s child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prowess of new, would-be, charter operator ▪ Effectiveness of vendor of professional development to middle-school math teachers

Four Dominant Approaches to Quality Control

How is QC tackled in dynamic sectors outside (as well as within) education? Four models predominate, each with distinctive strengths and weaknesses.

- A. The first model is the invisible hand of the market place, though this need not be purely a popularity contest or price competition. It may also include much specificity from would-be purchasers as to what a product or service must do and how well it must work, as in the Request for Proposal (RFP) process. Of course, that can also lead to over-prescriptiveness and market-stifling by customers who get so fussy that few suppliers can

meet their requirements and market entry by newcomers is thus deterred. (Think of the Air Force purchasing fighter planes or the transit system procuring new subway cars.) Indeed, the risk of market concentration and dominance is so acute that the U.S. has developed an entire “anti-trust” system to mitigate it. Government can also facilitate vibrant markets in other ways, such as the federal Health & Human Services department’s provision of comparative data on hospitals’ quality of care for heart-attack patients. Indeed, as we’ll see below, it can even help to create markets where none previously existed.

Concentration is not the only risk associated with markets, however, especially in education. Some entrepreneurs (e.g. some EMOs) are so enchanted with markets and marketing that they do not pay much attention to product quality or academic performance, only to whether customers will “buy” what they offer. Others engage in misleading advertising or offer ancillary services (e.g. after-school programs) that they know will be popular among parents without paying due attention to the effectiveness of the core school program itself. And parents, it must be said, are often undemanding consumers, willing to settle for such gains as safety, convenience, intimacy and a welcoming atmosphere without much regard for curricula and instruction. (That is not to deprecate sometimes-desperate parents’ most urgent needs, only to note that once those needs are met the parents do not necessarily go on to demand evidence of academic quality.)

Families are not the only “shoppers” in today’s education marketplace. School districts are customers, too, for technology, for services, and so forth. And, like parents, districts have frequently shown themselves to lack the expertise or incentive to scrutinize

the quality of goods or services that they purchase. (Recall the Los Angeles school system adopting a reading program a few years back without—apparently—even glancing at relevant research and evaluations.) Too many procurements simply follow the patterns of previous years, go to the lowest bidder, or hinge on the right salesman having treated the assistant superintendent to a particularly gratifying golf game.

In industry, firms such as J.D. Powers and Morningstar play the useful role of selling QC-type analyses to would-be purchasers, investors, etc. Something like this is probably appropriate to assist districts or CMOs to monitor the quality of the goods, services, technology, etc. that they procure.

Indeed, new entrants have greater need for it than do traditional districts because the former will inevitably be held to a higher standard of probity and performance. To the extent that CMOs, say, begin to displace districts, they will need to do a superior job of policing the products they purchase for their schools. Nobody expects individual shoppers at Wal-Mart to worry about the inventory software that the company uses, but we do expect Wal-Mart and its competitors to be persnickety consumers of inventory software, thereby imposing QC on the providers of such software.

- B. The second model is RIP-style government regulation of various kinds, whether it is the Agriculture Department inspecting meat-packing plants; the FDA requiring evidence of safety and efficacy for new drugs and medical devices; the state licensing beauticians and nursing homes; the SEC insisting on disclosure of gobs of information by publicly-traded companies; or a town demanding that building plans be submitted before a permit is issued and, later, that the edifice be inspected before it can be occupied. All of this, too, may serve to reward large operators (with, for example, sufficient capital to underwrite

field trials of new products) and stifle new entrants. It may or may not regulate key elements (e.g. the building may be safe but is it environmentally and esthetically friendly)? And it can be vulnerable to bureaucratic miasma, political manipulation and corruption.

As we have already seen, education is full of such regulation and some of it (e.g., proper use of public dollars, building safety) is not going to go away, even for new entrepreneurs. Neither are state academic standards, tests and accountability mechanisms (and their federal counterparts). But these, too, have plenty of shortcomings: weak standards, bad (or mis-aligned) tests, botched test-scoring, erratic and uneven accountability systems (for example, the kind that crack down on kids and schools but not teachers or principals), late data, inflated scores and such. A particular problem in education is that failings of the standards-and-testing system create more troubles in the marketplace by denying parents (and other purchasers) the clear, comparative data that might help them be more sophisticated retail consumers.

Looking ahead, one must ask whether government entities could play more helpful, proactive roles in encouraging better and more complete school data or encouraging—and assisting—-independent QC monitors, both of schools as well as of vendors and providers of education services.

- C. The third model is self-policing. Consider the movie rating system (PG, R, X, etc.); school and college accrediting bodies; the ways a bar association designs and oversees qualifying exams for legal practice in a state. “Peer review” in its many manifestations can also be thought of as a form of self-policing, often by experts in a particular field or specialty. With all forms of self-policing, however, comes the risk of “restraint of trade”

and discouragement of innovation. (One recalls the oft-told tale that crabs in a bucket waiting to be steamed will drag back down into the bucket any of their mates that gets a claw over the edge and tries to escape.) But there can also be the stimulus and quality encouragement afforded when, say, a school joins the Core Knowledge network or the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Can we imagine incentives that would encourage such education networks to provide greater QC—and make them more effective in doing so? Off the record, people affiliated with them admit that their “police” powers are weak and that they have a stronger incentive to add members than to bar those that do not rigorously adhere to the “model.” One assumes that private funders of such networks could use their dollars to encourage greater fidelity; perhaps government policy could do likewise via, say, deregulation of “certified” network members. We know that McDonalds or Quizno’s would move swiftly to intervene if franchisees used the wrong sized bun or altered the standard operational model—unless, of course, it were one of those nouveau franchisers that, within clear bounds, welcomes site-specific or regional variation. (A burger chain is more apt to add tacos to its menu in San Antonio than in Buffalo.) Indeed, corporate America, despite many screw-ups, does a fair amount of internal QC. Wal-Mart, Burger King and The Gap inspect their own stores, monitor their own products, and ferret out problems because they are worried about the impact of failing to do so. Hotel chains send anonymous inspectors to check on cleanliness and service.

Today’s education market includes some “proprietary monitoring,” especially by CMOs and EMOs that operate multiple schools in various places. The KIPP organization is famous for enforcing its own performance standards among schools that want to fly the

KIPP flag—and withdrawing its imprimatur when warranted. Other firms, however, use such monitoring more for internal management purposes than to assure uniform quality for consumers. Edison is but one of many such enterprises in which it is widely known that some schools are far better than others.

Nor is it clear that other vendors of education goods and services feel much incentive toward self-scrutiny. Consider textbook publishers, for example. Is this because the quality of their service is largely invisible and so there are no consumption consequences? Is it because it is costly and difficult for districts to switch to new texts and thus the customer is a captive of the vendor?

D. The fourth model is that of independent reviews similar to Frank Bruni’s restaurant ratings, the AAA and Mobil “star” system for hotels, Fiske’s college guides, *The New Yorker’s* film and theater reviews, Walter Mossberg’s appraisals of the latest technology, *Consumer Reports’* comparisons of toasters, *Car & Driver’s* evaluations of new autos, etc. Some of these qualify as “expert” reviews, others simply as user opinions. Some rely on data, lab tests, and formal comparisons, others purely on taste and esthetic preferences. Many are idiosyncratic (what if the restaurant reviewer dislikes shellfish or the music reviewer cannot abide hip-hop?); they can also be formulaic (using rigid check-lists that may not do justice to innovation); and they depend for their integrity on the incorruptibility of the organization, publication or individual. (Is *Wine Spectator* influenced by wineries that buy advertising inches?) Still, we rely on them for many decisions, sometimes where “objective” data are lacking—there is almost no such thing to be had when it comes to movies, plays, books and concerts, for example—and

sometimes because we want to be guided by another person or organization whose judgment we have come to trust.

And Yet More

Those four models are dominant but they do not exhaust the list of QC mechanisms in use in education. Here are six more variants that do not fit neatly under the headings above, though I have noted the categories that they seem most closely to resemble:

* When the “What Works Clearinghouse” reviews reading or math programs, it is looking—like the FDA—for hard evidence of effectiveness. Yet it is not a regulatory agency and its approval is not mandatory before a reading program can be deployed and purchased. Arguably, it is closer to the *Consumer Reports* model. “Expert judgment” can take other forms, too. Consider, for example, the influential report of the National Reading Panel (as well as sundry other commissions), which established criteria by which specific reading programs and providers can be appraised. The panel did not itself evaluate individual offerings but made it possible for others (such as those running the beleaguered federal Reading First program) to do so. (A, C, D)

* Audits and evaluations are typically “after the fact” or “mid-course” reviews, yet they may determine a provider’s or program’s future prospects. Audits are often strictly financial while “evaluations” are more apt to look at performance. Still, from federal agencies such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to state auditors to innumerable private firms (e.g. Mathematica or American Institutes of Research) that perform program evaluations, there is no shortage of entities whose business it is to engage in such reviews, the results of which can powerfully influence markets, government funding decisions, etc. (B)

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* “Inspectors” play a somewhat similar role, checking to see whether a provider is following the rules and doing what it promised. This can lead to constructive feedback (as in the British system of school inspections) or to immediate police-type action as when the health inspector spots signs of vermin in a restaurant and padlocks its door. It is far from foolproof, though. The corrupt building inspector is no urban legend. Neither, I fear, is the school inspector who dings a school just because he does not agree with its pedagogy. (D)

* Voting. Everyone is familiar with the formal election ballot, of course, and indeed it serves as a form of populist quality control (e.g. over the uses of public dollars). Everyone is also familiar with opinion polls. Mayor Bloomberg now has New Yorkers “grading” the city’s schools via almost two million “learning environment survey” forms distributed to parents, students and teachers.² Even newer—and greatly aided by modern technology—is “voting” via “wiki” methods, YouTube showings, instant web-based surveys, Zagat-style restaurant reviews and TripAdvisor.com evaluations of hotels and such. Here, inexpert consumers provide feedback on the quality of their experience with restaurants, hotels, airlines, and everything else. As with Amazon or eBay, one cannot claim that such ratings are “scientific”—hence they would, for instance, be vulnerable to courtroom challenge if used for awarding government contracts—but for individual consumers they can be extremely helpful, aggregating and synthesizing a slew of isolated data points that cannot otherwise be accessed or understood. In K-12 education, GreatSchools.net is beginning to amass such information from parents and in pre-K education one can find a version of it at “The Savvy Source for Parents” (<http://www.savvysource.com>). (A)

* Artificial intelligence. The Google system, for example, has its own proprietary criteria and decision algorithms for determining which among millions of websites are best suited to

certain needs, purposes or questions. Of course, it, too, can be manipulated and an entire cottage industry has arisen of consultants and firms that help organizations adopt terminology and links and other tricks believed to boost their search-engine rankings. (A)

* Data aggregations, often based on expert judgments about what data matter followed by gathering those selected facts. Examples include the annual *U.S. News and World Report* college ratings and *Newsweek*'s listing of the "best U.S. high schools." Typically, professionals within the field suggest criteria and categories, then journalists do their best to gather the information, aided by public sources of data and by many institutions' hunger to boost their own status in the academic pecking order by appearing on such lists. (Others shun such "popularity contests.") (A, C)

QC Criteria

Given so many different QC options and methods, how can one make prudent decisions about which to deploy in which circumstances? We might begin by suggesting a few generic criteria that could legitimately be applied to many parts of the education field—and, for that matter, to many other fields. These include:

- Does it (the provider, intervention, specialized program, etc.) do what it claims to do? That is, does it actually provide the service it promises for (where appropriate) the price that it states?
- Is there evidence of cost effectiveness? This may matter less for consumers of public education (who are spending taxpayers' funds), but it is certainly a question for districts or schools that must stay within budget when procuring goods and services.
- Is there reliable evidence (preferably from trustworthy third parties) that it accomplishes what it claims? In many instances, this would include evidence of enhanced student learning, but different evidence may be more appropriate for other kinds of providers (e.g., food services and data management).
- How reliable and consistent (and replicable) is it from one place to another, and how much does its performance depend on specific and thus variable implementation?
- What are its strengths and weaknesses compared to other providers of the same or similar services?

If we knew those things about every education entrepreneur, service, program or intervention, we would know a lot more than we do today and our QC efforts would take a long step forward.

Are there other QC methods and variants waiting to be devised? Surely yes. The most obvious involve unconventional ways of structuring markets. For example, we have had too narrow a view of the charter school marketplace, viewing it as entirely parent-driven whereas it should also be seen as authorizer-driven. Picture, say, an authorizer staging an RFP-style process in which it invites would-be school operators to compete for a limited number of charter slots.

Another example comes from New York City where chancellor Joel Klein's team has lately tried to devise market mechanisms and install them within that sprawling public-education system. The city has devolved additional funding and decision-making authority to its "empowerment schools" in such areas as teacher professional development. In turn, it has created inside-the-system "learning support organizations" from which principals can purchase such services on a competitive basis and has also authorized a number of external (private) "partnership support organizations" (PSOs) that schools may opt to work with instead. A 57-page principals' guide published in April 2007 explains how schools can determine which of these to work with and the mechanisms (some of them quite complicated) that they must use when contracting with those organizations. A small "market maker" office within the city Education Department facilitates these arrangements while also providing quality control via a competitive process in which would-be providers of such services had to present evidence of their past performance. The Education Department guide says that these PSOs "are led by nonprofit groups that have strong records of supporting schools and communities. The DOE selected these groups through a rigorous competitive process."

The New York example is interesting because it signals that three things are going on at once. First, the system is trying, albeit so far in limited ways, to give more choices to schools as to what “packages” of services they can select and where they can obtain these. In other words, it is allowing markets to develop where none previously existed. Second, the system is trying not only to invite new providers to compete with one another in delivering such services but also to transform some of its traditional internal providers from monopolists into competitors for schools’ business. Third, the system is trying to develop QC mechanisms that are attentive both to provider performance *and* to the conscientious stewardship of public dollars.

All this is far too new for any definitive judgments as to what is and is not working. But it signals an imaginative attempt by the traditional system itself to beckon entrepreneurs to enter in a structured way that captures at least some of the benefits of the marketplace without trusting the law of the jungle to provide quality control.

Concluding Thoughts

American education would benefit from hundreds more such experiments, both for “institutional” purchasers like schools and for families trying to make good decisions for their own children. We do not yet know exactly how to do this or how it will work. Which is to say, there is at least as much need for innovation and experimentation on the QC and rules-of-the-entrepreneurial-road fronts as among education entrepreneurs themselves. This will, however, likely prove even more challenging. For entrepreneurs have their own motives—some nobler than others—for entering the education space and doing their best to innovate, distinguish themselves and succeed in that territory. This is the great virtue of the private sector. By contrast, the rule-makers, QC enforcers and data-gatherers tend to be creatures of government, with all of the ponderousness, caution and politics associated therewith. The entrepreneurs will almost

certainly run faster. But it would surely be good for American education if the QC systems could be made to keep pace rather than left to retard—or ignore—the entrepreneurs.

Public policy works best with clean distinctions between what is and is not acceptable, between black and white, yes and no, permissible or not. Yet education quality control is full of grays, maybes and subtle balancing acts. “Mom and pop” entrepreneurs will arise in any deregulated space, including education. Some are excellent—the local dry cleaner or chef-operated restaurant—but some are awful. (Consider the dry cleaner that mangles clothes, the greasy spoon that induces heartburn.) It is not always easy to determine which is which at the outset and consumers may have trouble collecting reliable information. That uncertainty often propels them toward big brands (CarMax, Olive Garden, Holiday Inn) that typically offer a degree of consistency and predictability and that, because of their size and reputation, can monitor their own operations and be readily monitored by third parties. Yet these big chains are often risk-averse and bureaucratic, even oligopolistic, and cater to established markets with established habits rather than innovating. Hence good QC and monitoring are important to keep consumers from being frightened away from start-ups and small-timers, to keep the market open to unknown brands—and yet to ensure that people do not make bad mistakes (e.g. feeding their kids tainted food, sending them to a dreadful school) due to insufficient information.

Too much exit and entry in a market is hard on consumers, yet too little breeds homogeneity and complacency. It is at least possible that better QC information would entice new entrants where they are needed—where there is not a decent dry cleaner, restaurant or school within miles, say—and perhaps bring a measure of stability to locales or niches where small-scale providers are doing a decent job.

But QC in education, as in most fields, will not come from the entrepreneurs themselves, nor necessarily from boosters of entrepreneurialism. This is clearer than I like to admit in the school choice domain, where advocates have been swifter to emphasize deregulation and parental freedom than school effectiveness and where school operators are more apt to wow parents with nifty technologies, snazzy buildings and smiling teachers than by carefully displaying their value-added test score results alongside those of other schools. I sense that this is slowly changing in the charter school space—after years of being hammered for years by adverse studies, mediocre results and political opposition, and because NCLB and other results-based accountability regimens are slowly but surely requiring evidence of school effectiveness. Unfortunately, with that sort of top-down QC comes deadening sameness and inattentiveness to crucial consumer differences and provider distinctiveness.

Public policy, as I said, does best with simple distinctions—does your school “make AYP” or does it not? But that is only a fraction of the QC information that customers need and that entrepreneurs deserve. Disappointing as it is to conclude such a discussion with a plea for greater experimentalism instead of a bold proposal, I see no honest alternative at this time but to try a number of different approaches and see which ones—perhaps in combination—do more good than harm.

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¹ There are, of course, many more causes of the paucity of inventiveness and enterprise in the traditional system, including collective bargaining contracts, school board politics and personnel systems that don't exactly beckon innovators to work in public education.

² See, for example, <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/ChildrenFirst/Accountability/Surveys/default.htm>.