

May 10, 2006

Facing Our Fears About Competition

John R. LaPlante

Ruth Holmes Cameron may have spoken for many when she said “To say that competition is going to improve education—it’s just not going to work. You know, competition is not for children. It’s not for human beings, it’s not for public education.” Holmes, a former teacher, brought suit against a voucher program in Florida. Not only did she win her suit, but her sentiments, at least about education, are shared by others.

You may be thinking “not for human beings? I like it when companies compete for my business.”

So why is there so much fear of and opposition to competition in education? Here are a few reasons.

Some opposition to competition comes from self-interest. I hate to start on a negative note, but let’s state the obvious: few of us like having changes imposed on us. Introducing competition to education, through vouchers or a liberalized law governing charter schools, will bring changes.

Right now, your residence determines your child’s school. In a competitive model of education, though, funds are placed on the backs of students. They can take the money to any school their parents want. As some students move to new schools, the workday and even careers of some teachers, administrators, and school board members will be changed. Some will find the transition hard.

But this is not a good reason to squelch competition. Do we collect taxes for the benefit of the system, or for the students?

Some opposition stems from the view that competition is always a zero-sum game. True enough, competition often is zero-sum. Take sports for example. The University of Kansas and Wichita State University joined 63 other teams in the March Madness of college basketball. But on April 3, only one team out of sixty-five emerged as the ultimate winner. Every other team ended the season with a loss. And yet, each team accomplished a great deal in earning a berth in the NCAA tournament and in some cases, advancing far. The striving for excellence will have brought out the best in everyone.

You may be thinking “Yes, but that is sports; schooling is different.” But we also have competition in high school academics. This year, students from 325 high schools in Kansas participate in the scholars’ bowl. Six schools won their respective class competitions, while the others lost. Again, all gained from the experience.

Some opposition is based in a misunderstanding of who competes in school choice. It is not students who compete. It is schools, who compete for the right and privilege of educating students.

Some opposition is based in fear that some children will be hurt by competition among schools for students. The “creaming” argument says that schools get worse as some students, given vouchers, leave for other schools.

But when schools compete, students win, not lose. Students who take vouchers to private schools learn more than those who do not receive vouchers. Equally important, students who don't receive the vouchers improve as well. Faced with the prospect of losing even more students—and the tax dollars they bring—schools in Milwaukee that had students who were eligible for vouchers found ways to improve. Student achievement went up.

And of course colleges compete with each other all the time. As a result, America's higher education is the envy of the world.

Some people think that teaching is too important to leave to competition. Teaching is hard work, and teaching well is even more difficult. Why, some people argue, should teachers work for schools that compete against each other?

The fact that education is important does not mean that we ought to shield schools from competition. Good engineers, accountants, dentists, lawyers, and other professionals are, like teachers, important. Excellent professionals, like everyone else, respond to financial incentives for a job well done. They are judged by their results, which can earn them a good reputation with the public that can freely choose one professional over another.

Today, the role of professionalism in teaching is stunted. Schools depend on their claim on a geographic area, and teachers are paid not for performance, but time in service and the number of university credits earned. That needs to change, so that schools compete against each other, reward outstanding employees, and in turn are rewarded for excellence performance by increased enrollment.

It is often said that an increasingly competitive world demands excellence in education. This is true. Competition, the claims of Ruth Holmes Cameron to the contrary, is definitely for human beings, especially for the children who will benefit from the improvements it spurs in schools.