Learning From Others

The Center on Education Policy’s work on the London Challenge reminds us that we can learn from the successes and failures of others as policy makers around the world struggle to improve student performance. It can be simple tangible things like housing allowances that help teachers stay in the communities where they work and media kits that make it easier for schools to communicate. It can also be helping teachers talk to each other about what works and what doesn’t.

The London Challenge is important because it shows that a sustained program of reform can make a difference. It shows that additional resources, targeted at those most in need, can improve student performance. It shows that there is hope for urban schools serving diverse populations. It shows that school and community partnerships produce results.

None of this is surprising. Great Aunt Ollicent, who didn’t finish primary school, told me to do these things years ago. And kept telling me for the 10 years I was a Federal Government official responsible for education in Australia. Sometimes I ignored her, sometimes I “explained” why this or that would not work and occasionally I listened. When I listened I started to learn. This note helps us listen to the successes of the London Challenge. It also shows us that the English are happy to copy the successes of the US: “borrowing” the Teach for America model and re-labeling it “Teach First”.

It is hard to learn from other countries. Context varies, history is different, labor relations aren’t the same, financial arrangements are odd, and they don’t have Brown v Topeka or thousands of school districts. But they do have the same basic structure of schooling; they have teachers and classrooms, textbooks and standards. More broadly they participate in the same global economy and the same market for human capital. They are concerned about competitiveness and the balance of trade and what children know and are able to do. So it is important to do the hard work of learning from others.

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