COMMENTARY

Citizens and Their Schools

AUTHOR

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Polling on public education almost invariably reports the same pattern of responses when participants are asked to evaluate schools. Respondents give their local schools relatively high grades, but they give much lower grades to the public school system as a whole.

In other words, citizens trust the schools they know, where they send (or sent) their own children, but they are doubtful about schools elsewhere. The perceived distance between citizens and their schools is a big problem in California, where financial resources and regulations come mainly from the state and some school districts enroll more students than small countries. Restoring confidence and trust in the public school system is an essential prerequisite to winning the level of political and financial support that will be required to provide a high-quality education to all of the state's children.

PACE's recent seminar featured presentations on a project called Strategic School Funding for Results (SSER). Three very different school districts—Twin Rivers, Pasadena, and Los Angeles Unified—discussed the work that they are doing with Pivot Learning Partners and American Institutes for Research to shift more control over budgetary resources to the school site, along with greater accountability for resource use and student performance. The project is still in its initial phases, but it represents one plausible response to the question of how to strengthen the connection between citizens and their schools.

Shifting resources and responsibility to individual school sites should help to remove some of the mystery from school finance, by making the distribution and use of funds more transparent. But the general problem remains. A project like SSFR may further increase citizens' confidence in the probity and wisdom of local school leaders, but when the resources come mainly or entirely from the state their worries about how resources are being used elsewhere in the system will persist. The real challenge facing California is not simply trying to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of resource use, but how to reconnect schools with their local communities.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org