

Should the Education System Embrace 'Subsidiarity'?

Reports of failure in public schools tend to be systemic. Stories of success tend to be localized. Is this a reason to promote subsidiarity in the public school system?

[Subsidiarity](#) is a principle that calls for decision-making power and responsibility to be held at the lowest level as much as possible. Applied to schools, this would loosely mean that the district does not do or decide things for an individual school that the school can manage for itself, that the state does not unnecessarily interfere with districts, and that the federal government does not unnecessarily interfere with states.

It's tempting to take stories of individual success and formulate systemic policies from them. But the reasons for particular successes vary drastically with the context.



For instance: in the news recently there were examples of two schools who implemented opposite strategies to improve student performance... and both met with success.

As [The Atlantic](#) reports today, a Denver school used joy to climb from being one of the worst schools in the district to one of the best:

"The staff at McGlone Elementary School has a mantra: Happy kids learn more.

It's why the extended-day school in far northeast Denver offers nearly two hours of specials like art and music per day; why the cheerful and affectionate principal keeps a few 'golden tickets' clipped to her lanyard to give out as

rewards; and why the classrooms aren't the hushed, sit-up-straight, no-excuses type you might find elsewhere... McGlone's joyful philosophy seems to be working. Once one of the lowest-performing schools in the city, its impressive academic growth has turned it into a district darling."

Yet, in January, [NPR](#) published an article on how a small group of low-income charter schools, including a few schools in Denver, are using "no-nonsense nurturing" (note: no "happy kids mantra") to reform their schools:

"In 'no-nonsense nurturing,' directions are often scripted in advance, and praise is kept to a minimum... School leaders in Charlotte say no-nonsense nurturing gives their students structure that they need. They say they've noticed kids are more engaged since the district began using the approach. Out-of-school suspensions are down, and kids are missing fewer days at some schools."

Clearly, there is more than one way to skin a cat when it comes to good education. Schools can improve and exceed expectations by implementing different plans. They do this by recognizing the individual needs of their community in a way that only they can do.

There are [98,817](#) public schools in this country. Should we be focusing more on allowing schools to find their own path to success at the local level instead of trying a one-size-fits-98,817 approach?