GOOD INTENTIONS, UNINTENDED OUTCOMES

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1. Introduction

The panel's title, "Good Intentions, Unintended Outcomes,"
highlights the complexity of trying to predict the effects of a
proposed public policy. At first glance, the four papers presented
by the panelists may seem unrelated, but a common theme emerges,
either explicitly or implicitly, from these diverse papers: A
proposed policy cannot be evaluated without taking into
consideration the other policies or societal trends with which it
interacts. This point seems obvious, yet in practice it often is
ignored. I suspect that most "unintended" consequences occur
because policies are initiated without considering the broader
context.

Two of the papers presented by the panelists focused on improving
education or education research:

   o School-based management.

   o Introducing technology into a research organization.

The other two papers addressed the consequences of sanctions for
students:

   o Grade retention.

   o School expulsion.

In my comments, I give examples of unintended consequences related
to (1) public policies described by the panelists and (2) other
public policies.

2. Papers Presented by the Panelists

   o School-based management: There is a basic inconsistency
between policies such as centralized control, curriculum standards,
and standardized tests (whether used for teacher accountability or
for entrance into universities) and trends toward greater school
autonomy--school-based management, charter schools, vouchers, and
home schooling. The current emphasis on high-stakes tests, for
example, encourages homogeneity among school programs even if the
schools have some decision-making authority. Parental expectations
also play a major role. The AERA paper, which focused on case
studies in the United States and Britain, is consistent with

anecdotal reports from other countries. For example, many schools in Hong Kong are run by private organizations using government funds (essentially, a sytem of charter schools); in China, schools often run businesses to raise funds. In both cases, the schools' autonomy is constrained by university entrance examinations.

o Technology: The technological innovation described in the paper was more useful to some participants than to others. The innovation also happened to coincide with the fact that research enterprises are becoming increasingly international. The use of technology helped to increase the participation of international researchers and also of younger researchers, thus narrowing the gap--a positive outcome. In contrast, the College Board recently published a research report showing a very different outcome of technological innovation--in this case, distance learning--which appears to widen the gap because low-income students may not have access to the needed technology.

o Grade retention: The results of research assessing student effects of grade retention are mixed. The conflicting results may be, at least in part, related to other policies associated with grade retention--for example, the availability of academic services for the students who are retained in grade.

o School expulsion: Many factors are related to the effective implementation of school expulsion policies--for example, safeguards on differentiating serious from trivial offenses; policies with respect to students' return to school or to alternative placements; the availability of teacher training in effective management strategies; school expulsion policies for special education students; and, the general level of support offered to teachers by the school system.

3. Additional Examples of Unintended Consequences

o Class Size Reduction Act: Reducing class size might require some school districts to reduce teacher qualification standards in those jurisdictions or fields with teacher shortages.

o Title I: This federal program is intended to increase services to low-income schools. There is evidence that in many cases the objective is achieved, but in others the lowest-achieving students in these schools are assigned to aides for reading or mathematics, thereby giving the students who need the most help the least qualified teachers.

o National Board Certification: Teachers find the National Board certification process an excellent professional development experience, yet expansion of National Board certification is limited by inconsistencies between National Board standards and state standards and tests and also by inconsistencies between National Board standards and current practice in many teacher education and professional development programs.

o IDEA: The emphasis on inclusion assumed that the resources would be available to give special education students and regular classroom teachers the support they needed. In many cases, there is a large gap between intentions and practice with the result that some students are deprived of an appropriate educational experience and teachers may feel overwhelmed.

o The combined effects of education policies: The United States currently faces a shortage of qualified teachers. While those shortages reflect several different factors, including salary levels, we know that the perceived quality of the school environment is a major determinant of the choice to enter and remain in the teaching profession. That environment, in turn, is a product of both societal conditions and education policies. We currently are designing a project at The George Washington University to assess the effects of recent education policies on the teaching environment.

Several highly publicized reports published in the 1980s recommended that U.S. schools raise academic standards. Over the past 15 years, a set of policies has been implemented that is intended to meet that objective. There is considerable debate (although few definitive research findings) about the potential benefits and shortcomings of the policies. However, little attention is given to the fact that their success or failure may relate as much to how the policies affect the teaching environment as they do to the intrinsic merits of the policies themselves. If these well-intentioned policies, in combination, lead to overwhelming and contradictory demands on teachers, they may have adverse effects on teachers' job satisfaction and, in turn, on the ability to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. Examples of major policy trends are:

(1) School systems increasingly hold teachers and principals accountable for the standardized test scores of their students.

(2) There have been increases in the rate of introducing educational reforms--new curriculum standards, tests, and educational models as well as new administrative arrangements such as school-based management and school choice.

(3) Classroom teachers have been given increased responsibility for the academic achievement of students in special education and for implementing accommodations to enable the students to take standardized tests.