

School Choice

EDPE 4155: Education, Privatization, and School Choice

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Conservative policymakers from Milton Friedman to Betsy DeVos have used standardized test scores to measure the good of a school, despite an arsenal of evidence suggesting these results do not accurately assess a student's success nor a school's efficacy (Carnoy, 2017). As Henry Levin writes, "even as a measure of social outcome, achievement tests are a limited and highly imperfect sample of the range and depth of knowledge and skills, values, attitudes, and other behaviors that we expect schools to inculcate in the young" (1998). Interestingly, recent studies indicate there is little-to-no difference in the achievement gap between students in public schools and their private and charter counterparts (Carnoy, 2017; Levin, 1998); yet, conservative ideologues still knowingly use this erroneous metric to other public schools and their students. With approximately 53 million children receiving a public K-12 education, policymakers just coalesce around the idea of putting students' needs first: investing in teachers; tackling obsolete, unjust practices, like segregation; and structurally changing the ways in which public schools are funded.

Often, literature that recommends privatization relies on "raw test scores (i.e., the number of items correct) as the outcome variable metric... In Chubb and Moe's analyses, this choice of metric favors private and suburban schools" (Bryk & Lee, 1992). This bias is particularly salient, given the influence of their book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, on the charter school system. The book explicitly characterizes public schools as politicized arenas in which there are systemic constraints and political uncertainty. It further calls for a decentralized administration (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, though "years of educational reform efforts have produced many changes in most states... most of these reforms are mechanistic... [and] none... has changed the fundamental assumptions or structure of

schooling” (Shanker, 1988). Perhaps this is why there is “a lack of evidence that vouchers significantly improve student achievement (test scores) [and have] a modest, at best, impact on educational attainment (graduation rates)” (Carnoy, 2017).

Moreover, to equitably assess a school’s performance, it is imperative to understand its funding. Data confirms that

“more school funding significantly improves student achievement, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. Yet, [the] current approach to school funding at the federal, state, and local levels underfund [American] schools and result in many students from low-income backgrounds receiving less funding” (Warren, 2019).

With 92 percent of school funds coming from non-Federal sources at the elementary and secondary levels, it seems unlikely that the federal government would have the impetus or threshold to make a demonstrative difference without expanding funding (U.S. D.O.E., 2017).

Nonetheless, even when the federal government has leveraged small amounts of money to make structural changes in education—i.e., Race to the Top under Arne Duncan and the Obama administration—the efforts proved ineffectual. Former assistant secretary of education, Diane Ravitch, commented on the falling graduation rates under the Obama policy, saying, “choice, competition, and accountability as education reform levers are not working” (2010). However, Betsy DeVos, “with the backing of a conservative Congress and president, could provide funding for voucher and charter expansion in the states rather than funding programs that are more likely to improve learning” (Carnoy, 2017).

Evidence of this influence is evinced by tuition tax credits, which facilitate a crafty workaround for DeVos and the current administration to financially support private and

religious schools without using federal funding. “Effectively, this tax credit system still results in the government footing the tuition bill—through directly foregone revenues” (Welner, 2008, p. 6). This redistribution of funds from the public to the private sector forces state and local governments to adjust their budgets, in effect reducing the overall funding granted to public education. It is blasphemous for conservative policymakers and advocates of school choice to suggest such models catalyze growth throughout K-12 education. How could public schools—who have limited funding options—possibly compete with private schools, who have bountiful funding options, and now the support of the federal government? There is restricted equity in a government that systemically pits public versus private and chooses not to exercise impartiality.

While many conservatives support an aggressive approach that strengthens the socioeconomic divide between private and public schools, several Democratic politicians subscribe to a different ideology. At least two prominent candidates for president describe American early childhood education as a “piecemeal effort” (Sanders, 2019) and suggest the need to expand the role of government in public K-12 education to meet the needs of students, communities, and a growing public good (Sanders, 2019; Warren, 2019). More moderate Democratic candidates, like Pete Buttigieg, also recognize “there [is] an inequity in resources, and it [is] clear that we could do something of that at the federal level” (Blad, 2019). However, a politician appreciating the lack of equity in education is tantamount to a doctor acknowledging an injury without providing a diagnosis or course of treatment. It is insufficient for policymakers to analyze the political symptoms of the educational infrastructure without recognizing their causes or lasting effects. Without taking a stance on behalf of public schools, one likely advances “privatization, [which] often takes the form of a strategy to re-align

institutions and decision-making processes so as to privilege the goals of some groups over the aspirations of others” (Feigenbaum, Henig, & Hammet, 1999). Furthermore, Buttigieg’s viewpoint validates Shanker’s assessment of politicians who “[aim] to fix [the system’s] broken parts, with some fine-tuning here and a few adjustments there, to get the system more or less back to its original shape” (2019, p. 89).

Still, more pressing is Shanker’s (2019) question regarding incrementalism: is it right, or is faith in it misplaced (p. 89)? It seems evident that, for decades, incrementalism has not served American students well; as the largest public school system in the United States, New York City public schools also remain the most segregated in the country. Sixty-five years after Brown v. Board of Education, students now organize rallies and attend city council meetings to challenge the work of the chancellor and mayor concerning integration (The Weekly, 2019). These young people are phenomenally admirable; they continue to fight to reroute the path they inherited, one paved by politics that accommodate the cooperation of legislators over the lives of their constituents. These students represent the very essence of the United States of America, but it is shameful that they must advocate for themselves, for their fundamental right to inclusive education.

Furthermore, the empirical studies that conclude choice-based systems in the United States are inefficient in advancing academic achievement are not revolutionary. They echo fears of Justice Stevens in his 2002 dissent in Zelman v. Simmons-Harris in which he posited: if 90 percent of all students in Cleveland are below proficient, is a choice-based system realistically capable of fostering the changes needed? It is not, or Florida, Arizona, and Wisconsin would all experience the supposed benefits of choice-based schooling (Abrams,

2019; Welner, 2008). Notwithstanding, Justice Stevens’s question continues to spark debate, which incubates partisanship, divisiveness, and ultimately leaves millions of students at the studiedly incapable hands of incrementalist and ineffective policies. Between the students of New York City, this year’s striking teachers of Chicago, and millions of advocates throughout the country, it is past time to place the needs of America’s teachers and students at the forefront of the discussion. Their needs—whether equitable pay or opportunities to succeed—are not partisan issues and, surely, should not stand in the way of passing sensible legislation that supports public education.

However, it should be noted that Milton Friedman, Chubb and Moe, and even Betsy DeVos are not objectively wrong about vouchers; they are just woefully misguided about how best to implement such a system. In the Netherlands, for example, approximately 70 percent of students use school vouchers, but under strikingly different conditions: “private schools... receive essentially all their resources from the government, and they [do not] charge additional fees” (Schleicher, 2017). While this is one example, it implies a choice-based system can work for communities who want it and under the guidance of government leaders who understand “[i]f we think of schools in terms of markets, the amount of ‘elasticity’ can be limited, both in terms of families looking for places and what schools can offer” (Schleicher, 2017). Ultimately, if any alternative to public school were to thrive at the national level, it, like its public competitor, would require tremendous reorganization and intervention at the federal level.

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