

DOCUMENT REVIEWED:	“When Private Schools Take Public Dollars: What’s the Place of Accountability in School Voucher Programs?”
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Summary of Review

The Fordham Institute conducted a survey of experts who are advocates of private education, soliciting opinions about how private schools accepting public monies, such as from voucher programs, should be held accountable. The experts were in agreement that private schools should not accept regulation of their day-to-day operations, but disagreed among themselves whether to accept top-down standardized testing accountability. The Fordham researchers proposed a compromise position in which the more the private schools rely on public money, the more the schools should be subject to the same requirements as public schools. The Fordham study is a reasonable inquiry into the difficult area of private/public education ventures. Although the study does not arrive at a definitive position, it raises important issues about accountability in both private and public education.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

This has been a bad year for market fundamentalism, the belief that markets can solve most problems and also are self-correcting and therefore need little regulation or oversight. The collapse of the financial markets has shaken even ardent market fundamentalists. Alan Greenspan has confessed that something is wrong with the theory. An angry U.S. public and government seem intent on regulating the private financial institutions that crashed the world financial system.

In education, extreme market ideas have not been carried quite so far, notwithstanding intense advocacy. While advocates of vouchers, charter schools, and private schools usually justify privatization by citing vague benefits that accrue from markets, they rarely offer comprehensive analyses of economic concepts, detailing how markets function and malfunction. Market advocates ignore prominent work such as transaction cost economics or analyses of how asymmetric information access disrupts free markets. Of course, such atheoretic approaches also dominate the arguments of many critics. Education has long been marked by fads and fashions.

With this history as background, it was a pleasant surprise to read a Fordham Institute report calling for accountability for voucher schools: "...we believe it's time for school choice supporters to embrace accountability, done right." The Fordham researchers make an honest attempt to tackle the difficulties of holding private schools accountable instead of simply waving the magic market wand at the problem.

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The Fordham Institute led by Chester Finn, Jr. has long been a seedbed of conservative educational thought, especially ideas supporting privatization and standards-based accountability. In this study¹ the Fordham group surveyed a group of experts who are advocates for school choice and voucher policies, to ascertain their opinions about how those private schools accepting voucher students might be held accountable. These sometimes diverse views are presented and discussed in the report. The respondents agreed that participating private schools should not face government regulations regarding day-to-day school operations, such as with admissions or retention. The government should leave private schools alone in these regards, even if they receive public subsidies. The private education experts also agreed that parents should receive information about their own children's performance and that voucher programs as a whole should be rigorously evaluated by third-party researchers.

However, there was considerable disagreement among respondents about making school results and financial audits public. Some respondents wanted to "let the market rule" while others thought private schools receiving public monies should have accountability requirements similar to public schools. The Fordham researchers conclude by recommending a sliding scale of transparency and accountability in which the more revenue private schools receive from vouchers, the more those schools should be subject to the same accountability requirements as public schools. If a majority of

funding is from private sources, the schools should be treated like private schools, whereas if majority funding is from public money, they should be treated more like public schools. The authors note that this compromise will probably please few people, and in this they are likely correct.

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALE FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study seems to be to define an acceptable position on how private schools receiving voucher funds can be accountable. Political pressures have been mounting against voucher programs recently. Some prominent programs are in jeopardy, including the Washington D.C. program, the Milwaukee program, and the Arizona programs.² Polls cited in the Fordham study indicate that the American public believes private schools accepting public funding should be subject to the same accountability requirements as public schools, a position not favored by the private educators.

The Fordham researchers hoped to define an accountability position that most private education experts can support, though not one that most private education now agree with. Based on the study's data, one may or may not accept the compromise position the researchers reach. That public money should be used for private schools is assumed explicitly by the researchers from the beginning. That is not an issue for this study and was not a consideration. The researchers assume public money for private schools is a good thing. The survey respondents were also selected only from among those who share this premise. Therefore, the report should be read and understood as describing accountability ideas among advocates for school choice.

IV. THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The Fordham researchers cite only a handful of studies, mostly previous reports on voucher programs. But, for purposes of this study—soliciting the opinions of private education experts—not much literature review was required. The structured questions on the survey reveal extensive knowledge of the issues and possibilities in play. So, though the literature review is limited, it seems adequate for the purposes of the study.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODS

The Fordham researchers identified 30 experts who are advocates for school choice and voucher policies and surveyed their opinions about the transparency and accountability of private schools that accept voucher students. Twenty responded. We are not told who did not respond, but there is no reason to believe a particular group from among the choice advocates was omitted systematically. Although the researchers do not reveal why they chose particular respondents, the credentials of the respondents certainly demonstrate expertise in private education. The experts include Jeb Bush, scholars from the American Enterprise Institute, the Goldwater Institute, the Walton Family Foundation, as well as practitioners from religious, private school, and for profit organizations.

It would have been interesting to see the identities of the ten who did not respond, but that is no reason to fault the sample. The researchers do not claim these views represent the views of all private education experts. The study is more an issue-clarifying exercise.

The survey itself is structured with considerable information presented to respondents followed by having them choose among three or four options. The respondents could also respond in an open manner. In the presentation of findings, the researchers do not report numbers. For example, is it ten or eighteen respondents who object to the use of standardized tests for accountability purposes? Instead, we are told “a few” or “several” or “many” said something. Why not use the actual numbers of respondents who held certain positions? This is a minor flaw in the reporting, though one might wonder if the majority of respondents held different views than those of the researchers from time to time. The report is clearly presented and written, clarity being a virtue ordinarily lacking in educational research.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study seems to report and discuss the views of the surveyed private education experts faithfully. In that sense it is a valid representation of those views. Some of the most interesting aspects are the discussions of specific findings, particularly the reasoning behind different views. The ultimate recommendation of the Fordham researchers is a compromise position gleaned from reading the respondents’ views. One is not obliged to agree with it even while accepting the accurate portrayal of views.

The Fordham researchers also present a useful two by two table concerning the schooling goals of transparency and accountability, with each cell ranging from low to high on each dimension. This is a helpful distinction between making information public and being held accountable in some more material way.

VII. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

Although the study presents the views of only one group of conservative experts, I believe the findings are useful. These experts are influential, and the issues of transparency, accountability, and standardized testing are likely to remain salient, in spite of political pressures against vouchers. The transparency/accountability distinction is conceptually useful for those thinking about such issues. I would add program evaluation to these two concepts. Evaluation is useful if one wanted to compare students in private schools with those in public schools because such comparisons require sophisticated designs. A simple comparison of test scores without careful design often leads to invalid conclusions. Transparency and accountability are insufficient to sort this out.

Although some private education ventures are under pressure, the general direction towards privatization appears unlikely to change under President Obama. Efforts to privatize education and achieve accountability through standardized testing began with Reagan, expanded under Bush and Clinton with more testing, and intensified with the second President Bush’s No Child Left Behind. With the exception of vouchers, the Obama administration shows early signs of continuing both policies—school choice and accountability through testing policies. So the accountability issues raised by the Fordham report remain salient in the new administration.

To add my own opinion, I agree with many of the private education experts that (to quote from the report): “top down accountability arrangements might exact too high a

price when it comes to a principal's autonomy to run the best possible school, particularly if these arrangements push schools to adopt a mediocre curriculum, pledge allegiance to dubious academic standards or teach to a test—particularly a bad one” (p. 5). Yet some private education experts seem to hold an implicit view that private school students and teachers are of a different kind than public students and teachers and that only the latter need be disciplined with burdensome top-down testing requirements. I don't accept the difference in kind. In fact, I see no reason to believe this negative pressure does not currently affect public schools the same way that these experts foresee for private schools.

As these ideas move forward, what I hope

these private education experts address in the near future is how to hold schools—both public and private—accountable “without strangling them.” One of the most interesting findings of the study is the one just noted: that many private education experts are fully aware of the danger that heavy externally imposed accountability through standardized testing poses to private schools and want no part of it. If private schools could develop or demonstrate imaginative alternative accountability approaches that are not so onerous or self-defeating—beyond the sorts of market pressures that some free-market advocates believe to be sufficient, but that clearly are not—it would be a major contribution to education from which public schools could benefit. Perhaps that exploration could be on some future agenda.

Notes and References

¹ Finn, C.E., Hentges, C., Petrilli, M.J. & Winkler, A.M. (2009, March). *When Private Schools Take Public Dollars: What's the Place of Accountability in School Voucher Programs?* Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute

² Thomso, R. (2009, March 26). School-voucher movement loses ground after democratic gains. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved April 13, 2009, from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123802174302441779.html>

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