

THE COMINGLING OF NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY, METHODS, AND FUNDING IN SCHOOL CHOICE POLITICS AND RESEARCH

Julian Vasquez Heilig, T. Jameson Brewer, and Frank Adamson

To conceptualize the politics of research on school choice, it is important to first discuss the politics of market-based approaches within the broader purview of public policy. Modern notions of “markets” and “choice” in schooling stem from the libertarian ideas Milton Friedman espoused in the 1950s. As these ideologies escalated in the 1980s under neoliberal theory and Republican orthodoxy, the argument that parents should have choice between competing schools within an education market with little regulation began to crack the public schoolhouse door, allowing an influx of private school vouchers and charter schools.

The ideology of a competitive education market supposes that competition and deregulation are necessary and fundamentally positive forces that will “fix” the “failed” public school sector (Vasquez Heilig, 2013). Mundy and Murphy (2000) argued that to build public support for their approaches, neoliberal proponents focus on three organizing economic rationales: 1) efficiency, 2) the axis of competition-choice-quality, and 3) the apparent scarcity of resources. On the supply side, neoliberals argue that private firms deliver goods and services more efficiently than the government. On the demand side, neoliberals “promote competition as a means to deliver more consumer choice, which theoretically leads to higher quality products” (Adamson & Astrand, 2016, p. 9).

Because school choice is a policy prescription, research and evaluation often follow soon after the policies are implemented. In theory, new reforms should be piloted, researched, and then determined to what extent they can—or should—be scaled. School choice advocates work backward: They conduct multiple experiments on communities in an attempt to justify a policy rooted in ideology rather than empirical evidence. In fact, Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) found that many states passed laws supporting charter school expansion at a faster rate than they could build the schools and faster than the normal research cycle needed to determine their effectiveness. Furthermore, this ideology presupposes the efficiency and effectiveness of educational markets, requiring education to be understood as an individualistic good rather than a public one.

The dichotomy between the concepts of a “public” or a “private” good rests at the center of school choice approaches. The idea of education as a public, or common, good views it through the lens of the collective and, theoretically, ensures equal access and equitable experiences. Conceptions of education as a common good—in the same way we conceptualize, say, police/fire services, public libraries, and public roads—stem from the understanding that individuals in society share an

obligation to one another, and if we collectively focus on improvement, we collectively benefit. The contrasting view is the ideology rooted in Friedman's (1955) rugged individualism, with a limited conception of public or common goods. According to Friedman, there is little collective obligation to one another, and a self-interested focus on personal improvement will, theoretically, improve the collective. Note that within this theory, the byproduct of collective improvement is not necessarily a result of a spillover from the individual to the collective; rather, through hyper-individualistic accountability, everyone for him- or herself, the improvement of individuals will, taken as a whole, represent the improvement of the masses.

The conceptualization of education as an individualistic good—a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded in educational markets—requires a reliance on a theory of meritocracy, whereby success is “attainable” through education and “hard work.” By definition, success is the result of making use of such things. Poverty, then, becomes evidence of poor choices and a failure to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps rather than an economically produced phenomenon. This myth that associates hard work with morals not only allows for the crass dismissal of systemic poverty and racism endemic in American society, but also informs how we conceive of educational choices within an educational marketplace. School “choice” systems in education further exacerbate individualistic accountability while also reinforcing the façade that success or poverty is a choice between working hard or failing to seize an opportunity. That is, if the choice exists for a “better” education in a charter school or by use of a school voucher, then generational poverty shifts the locus of accountability to the individual and family for failure to take advantage of the choice. Put simply, the presence of additional choices in education redefines public policy failures not as collective ones but as individualistic failures understood through deficit ideologies.

Considering the underlying politics of school choice, it is important to examine the ramifications of neoliberal and collective ideology on market-based school choice research. In this chapter, we point out that ideologically driven, neoliberal organizations push a sector of research suggesting positive findings of school choice models. We begin with a synthesis of the pertinent literature on the conceptions and funding of market-based school choice research. Next, we discuss the role of the production and politics of market-based school choice research in conceptualizing the current educational policy environment. In the third section, we delve into the politics of the use of market-based school choice research, focusing on the community level. We conclude by discussing the implications of how the comingling of ideology, methods, and funding informs the public discourse about market-based school choice and fits into the larger conversation about education reform.

Politics, Conceptions, and Funding of Market-Based School Choice Research

In the quest to determine if, and to what extent, a policy is effective, there remains the possibility that the types of questions and methods employed during research, and its funding, can be ideologically influenced. The first decade of the 21st century intensified the quantitative and qualitative debate that has divided the social science community for years. More precisely, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reified a commitment toward quantitative, “objective” scientism while relegating qualitative and contextual understandings to a subpar practice. The National Academy of Sciences held that “federal and state agencies should prioritize the use of evidence-based programs and promote the rigorous evaluation of prevention and promotion programs in a variety of settings in order to increase the knowledge base of what works, for whom, and under what conditions” (O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009, p. 371).

That is, educational research and social inquiry are to be approached in systematic, experiential trials—often with the so-called “gold standard” of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)—that advocates of market-based policies have misused for universalizing and generalizing findings

regardless of the assumptions made in such studies (Lubienski & Brewer, 2016). There has long been a push to assert the RCT as the *pièce de résistance* in educational research because, in the most ideal settings, it features “random assignment” to the treatment or control group and eliminates selection bias (Mosteller & Boruch, 2002).

For example, in the quest to determine whether school choice models, such as charter schools, “work,” researchers (largely supported by ideological organizations such as EdChoice and the Fordham Institute, a point we take up below) have increasingly proposed the use of RCTs to compare variance of outcomes among students receiving the school choice treatment and those remaining in public schools (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1998; Rouse, 1998; Greene, 2001; Howell & Peterson, 2002/2006; Barnard, Frangakis, Hill, & Rubin, 2003; Krueger & Zhu, 2004; Cowen, 2008; Jin, Barnard, & Rubin, 2010; Wolf et al., 2013; Bitler, Domina, Penner, & Hoynes, 2015; Chingos & Peterson, 2015; Mills & Wolf, 2016; Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Walters, 2018; EdChoice, n.d.). Despite the specters of bias and validity, pro-charter organizations consistently promote such research even though there remains a considerable level of skepticism surrounding the unwavering power of RCTs in educational research—even within the studies themselves (Lubienski & Brewer, 2016)—and the elevation of quantitative over qualitative methods in general (Berliner, 2002). In the field, criticism has been growing about the “idealization of random assignment as the only worthwhile research method” (Phelps, 2017, para. 17) that echoes some long-standing, if not ignored, pushback from the evaluation community on the merits of other rigorous methodologies (AEA, n.d., as cited in Patton, 2006).

In the age of hyper-accountability and assessment, policymakers have increasingly linked funding to the results of evaluations. Given the rampant existence of the “Protestant Work Ethic” dispositions outlined by Max Weber (1930) that have informed the myth of meritocracy (McNamee & Miller, 2009), it has become commonsensical in our rhetoric and practice that one should be held accountable for the duties and monies to which one has been made responsible. In education, this is manifested in ways such as holding students accountable for their grades, teachers for the production of good and better test scores, administrators for the reduction in documented discipline problems, and school districts for doing more with less money. Despite the serious concerns surrounding the inability of RCTs and other quantitative methods that do not take context (viewing education as a-contextual) and student selection into consideration, the elevation of such methods views education through a reductionist lens.

Student selection into educational contexts is hardly random from the small-scale assignment to a particular class roster to larger-scale assignment to a school or district. A standing fundamental concern around the elevation of RCT and its purported randomization is that, unlike pharmaceutical random trials, the students in the treatment group know that they are receiving the treatment and the students who applied for and were rejected for the treatment (i.e., failing to obtain—or turning down—a voucher or losing a charter lottery) are more likely to know that they are in the control group. The contexts of students’ lived realities play a significant role in their educational outcomes, and that can hardly always be controlled for through statistical equations. Moreover, “the practical consequences of scientism in education are that it will institute a notion of the curriculum as ‘cook-book,’ teaching and learning as ‘proven method’ or ‘best practices,’ research as ‘funded enterprise,’ and educational inquiry as only ‘what works’” (Baez & Boyles, 2009, pp. 51–52).

Given the political foundations and rationales of school choice, there remains an insatiable requirement to conduct experimental and nonexperimental research that justifies school choice expansion. The expansion effort has required significant levels of funding to create a body of quantitative research and the appearance of a predominance of objective observation. Considering that school choice mechanisms have actually largely underperformed when compared to their public school counterparts (Vasquez Heilig, Williams, McNeil, & Lee, 2011; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Vasquez Heilig, Holme, LeClair, Redd, & Ward, 2016; Vasquez Heilig, Nelson, & Kronzer, 2018),

the continued quest for certainty that school choice “works” and should be replicated is an artifact of the ideological commitment that pro-school choice researchers and intermediary organizations have to reshape the educational landscape along libertarian and neoliberal lines.

Additionally, as suggested by Jacob (2015), the common practice of rejecting RCT studies that find no effects on these policies not only hinders the larger research community’s access to studies including such data but, in our view, also opens the door wider for pro-reform organizations to mischaracterize studies that do find effects as generalizable evidence that their favored privatization reforms work. That is, the absence or minimal existence of published studies finding no effects may create a misleading façade that can be exploited for ideological and political purposes.

Policy Patrons: Ideological Intermediary Organizations and Funding

The “policy patrons” are a cabal of philanthropic organizations that use funding to influence educational reform (Tompkins-Stange, 2016) and, in the process, bolster support for private control and privatization of public goods, such as education, by propping up market-based choice (Vasquez Heilig & Clark, 2018). The policy patrons draw from a shared ideological commitment to capitalism and free markets. As mentioned previously, they are ideologically committed to enacting and overseeing the shift from viewing education as a public good to an individualistic commodity, whereby education is a service, students and parents are customers, and the service provider (the charter or voucher school) competes with public schools for customers (Scott, 2013).

For example, the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) has a long history of promoting market-based reforms throughout every level of educational policy. Drawing its financial support primarily from the profits of Walmart, the WFF has leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars in the quest to project business and market-oriented ideology into the public sphere (Strauss, 2014). The groundwork laid by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) release of *A Nation at Risk* provided—and continues to provide—an impetus for the argument that the government is woefully inefficient and ineffective at providing public goods. As such, school choice proponents have argued that the remedy is transferring oversight and school operation into private hands. Are we now supposed to reimagine public education not as a public good that is to be delivered, managed, and regulated through governments, but rather as a private good delivered through private business ideology inspired by a foundation that benefits from the world’s largest corporation?

The WFF is certainly not alone when it comes to funding school choice mechanisms and research that purports to justify the practices. The past few decades have seen a rapid increase in the amount of, and total dollar investment from, the Gates Foundation and myriad intermediary organizations (IOs) and think tanks that produce and promote educational research (Reckhow, 2013; Ferrare & Reynolds, 2016; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Ferrare & Setari, 2018). Other notable policy patrons within the education reform network promoting school choice include the Hastings Fund, the Broad Foundation, the Arnold Foundation, and the Bezos Foundation. Ken Saltman (2010, 2011) suggested that the hands-on approach to modern philanthropy by way of IOs and think tanks differs from the more hands-off approach to philanthropy of past decades. Again, operating within the thinking that businesses are better suited to provide and manage educational choices, IOs typically have no meaningful connection to education other than that they are funded and led by successful business tycoons who, because of their financial success, are considered proficient in generating success writ large.

The Walton, Hastings, Gates, and Broad philanthropic organizations are heavily intertwined within the broader network of market-based education reform organizations (see Figure 24.1). Notable direct connections to intermediary organizations include: 50CAN, Center for American Progress, Center for Education Reform, Center for Reinventing Public Education, Charter School Growth Fund, Education Trust, Educators 4 Excellence, National Alliance for Public Charter

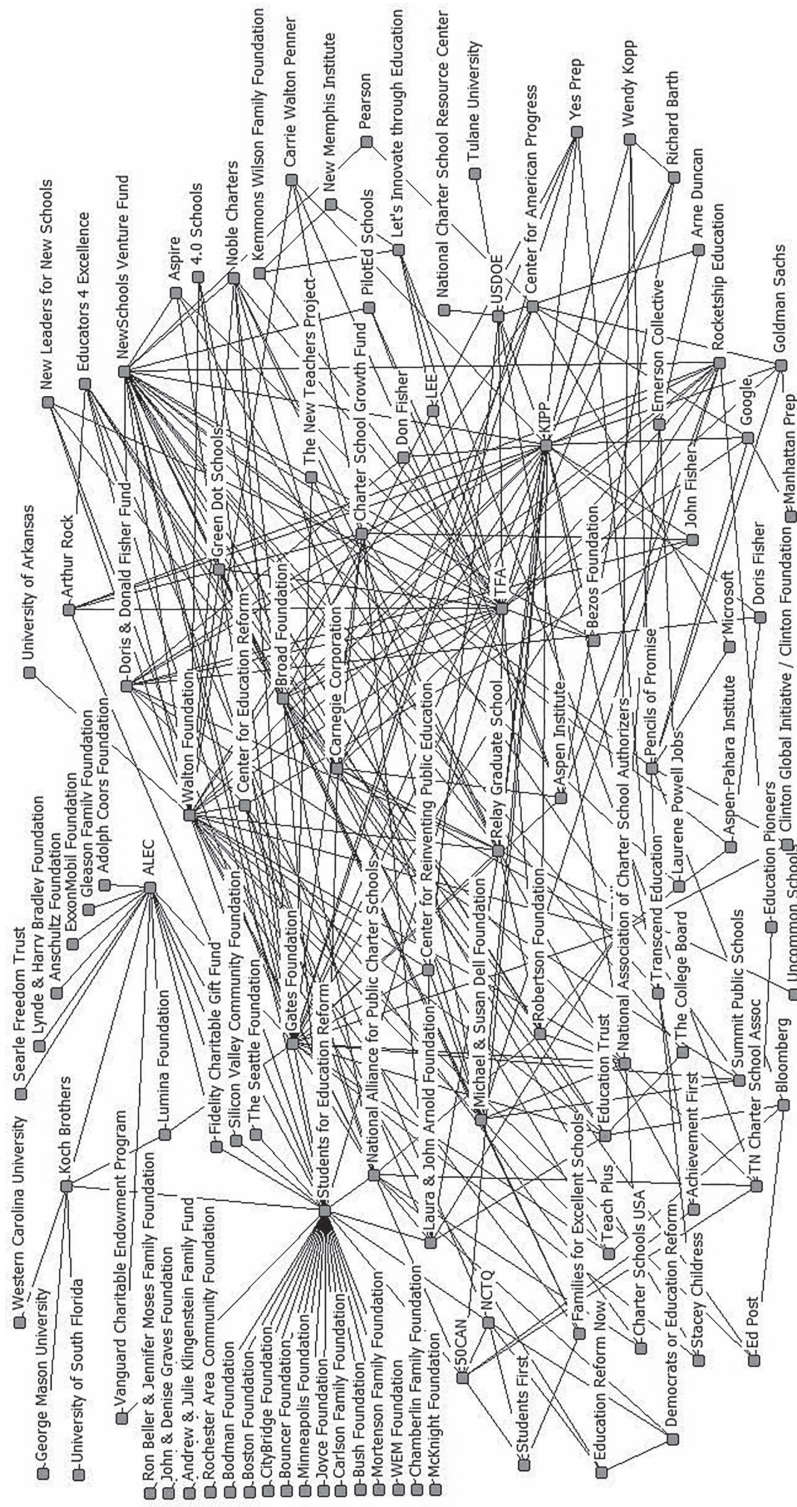


Figure 24.1 Pro-Choice Intermediary Organizations and Philanthropic Donors.

Schools, National Association of Charter School Authorizers, New Leaders for New Schools, NewSchools Venture Fund, Relay Graduate School, Students for Education Reform, Teach For All, Teach For America, and Teach Plus.

Notably, Figure 24.1 also shows that there are connections to charter school chains such as 4.0 Schools, Green Dot Schools, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Noble Charters, and Rocketship Education. While IOs are not directly involved in the creation, management, and oversight of charter schools, the ones listed above are heavily involved in providing political clout as well as policy and governance structural support to expand school choice options. What is notable about the politics of school choice, and the research that accompanies it, is the presence of a set of politically diverse individuals and organizations. Namely, the school choice reform network receives a substantial amount of financial and political support from individuals such as the politically far-right Koch brothers as well as organizations that are purportedly on the left side of the spectrum, such as Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) and the Clinton Foundation.

The policy patrons have generously funded peer-reviewed and advocacy-based research examining charter schools and school vouchers. Venture philanthropists have channeled their funding through IOs to fund education departments and, specifically, educational research departments focused on school choice. For example, the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform (UADER) promotes its School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) as an unbiased evaluation process of school choice reforms. Notably, the advisory board of SCDP includes connections to Bellwether Education and the American Enterprise Institute—staunch supporters of school choice (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014). In 2005, UADER was in fact partially created with \$10 million in seed money from the Walton bequest. And UADER is not alone. A growing number of departments in higher education (e.g., George Mason University, University of South Florida, Western Carolina University) have also been heavily funded by the Koch Brothers who, along with the WFF, have mutual ties within the broader pro-reform network and have vested interests in promoting the privatization of public schools (deMarrais, Brewer, Atkinson, Herron, & Lewis, 2019). As a result, the politics of educational research in higher education has become more blurred at the institutional level when considering the increasing role that the policy patrons have played in funding research.

Politics of Production and Response to Market-Based School Choice Research

The past two decades saw an acceleration of research generated on market-based school choice. While it is difficult to estimate the total amount of that research, it is possible to use the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) to track the total amount of peer reviewed research (blind, or anonymous, peer review and expert peer review— not including internal, editorial, and dissertation reviews) on charter schools and school vouchers (see Table 24.1).

Published research examining charter schools and school vouchers in the United States has increased in frequency during the past two decades. Table 24.1 shows that the number of peer-reviewed articles about charter schools more than doubled between 2009 and 2018 (1,191) compared to the prior decade (533). In fact, since 2014, there were more peer-reviewed articles published (641) about charter schools than between the entire ten years of 1999 and 2009 (533). Perhaps owing to the more limited use of vouchers across the U.S. compared to charter schools, there were only 25 more articles published about school vouchers between 2009 and 2018 than the prior ten years. At the current pace of about 128 per year, peer-reviewed studies about charter schools far outpace (i.e., by about 610 percent) the average of 21 articles published about school vouchers.

Probably the most cited nonpeer-reviewed research in policy conversations about charter schools is produced by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford

Table 24.1 Pace of Peer-Reviewed Research (in English) about Market-Based School Choice

	Charter Schools	School Vouchers
1999–2009	533	205
2009–2018	1,191	228
2009–2014	550	121
Since 2014 (last 5 years)	641	107
2017	168	22
First half of 2018	53	6

Source: ERIC search keywords “charter schools” and “school vouchers”—peer-reviewed only.

University’s conservative-leaning Hoover Institute. CREDO uses student-level data to compare student achievement in charter schools and neighborhood public schools. Its studies usually find that students in charter schools display slightly greater overall performance gains (typically in the hundredths of a standard deviation) than their peers in matched neighborhood public schools. Notably, when disaggregated by race/ethnicity, the achievement effects in charters that CREDO reports are often negative for Black and other groups when compared to neighborhood public schools (Vasquez Heilig, 2018). There is one other exception to the typically positive findings about charter schools: CREDO has posited that students of online charter schools have performed poorly (Woodworth et al., 2015). Nevertheless, five reviews (Miron & Applegate, 2009; Maul, 2013, 2015; Maul & McClelland, 2013; Miron & Shank, 2017) have critiqued CREDO’s methodological choices and suggested that their work overstates findings, ignores relevant literature, and “fails to address known methodological issues, suggesting an agenda other than sound policymaking” (National Education Policy Center [NEPC], 2017, para.1).

EdChoice, formerly the Friedman Foundation (founded by Milton Friedman), is the modern-day incarnation of an education reform organization that seeks to serve as a clearinghouse related to school choice. It is arguably the most prominent advocate of school vouchers. EdChoice (n.d.) has proffered in the public discourse that 11 of 12 “gold standard” randomized studies showed a positive impact for vouchers. Independent peer review of claims like these is important because randomized studies can still suffer from fatal statistical weaknesses (i.e., peer-effect bias) and general validity issues. Lubienski and Brewer (2016) examined the gold standard studies cited by EdChoice and found:

Although voucher advocates indicate that the research is conclusive, consistent, and thus generalizable, and essentially beyond reproach, closer examination . . . suggests little consensus or consistency across the reported findings. When there are positive effects, they do not translate across different contexts, populations, programs, grade levels, or subjects. Moreover, we highlight some limitations of these studies, which the advocates do not acknowledge, and show that, because findings on vouchers are less compelling or promising than proponents claim, the misrepresentation of empirical findings by advocates appears to be a key element of their advocacy agenda. (p. 455)

In direct response to the waves of inquiry activism from conservative researchers and the UADER, Fordham Institute, EdChoice and other advocacy organizations, the NEPC has organized approximately 150 of North America’s top academics and educators as fellows to review reports and studies that span the educational policy spectrum. NEPC (n.d.) describes the fellows as having “a wide range of expertise bearing on education policy issues . . . [and] considerable experience speaking with members of the media, policy makers, and community members about their work” (para. 2).

NEPC reviews have found that school choice researchers have engaged in cherry-picking to make ideological claims (Lubienski & Brewer, 2013, 2014), often ignore research findings that challenge their ideological assumptions (Brewer & Lubienski, 2017), and move the goalposts and use questionable methods in an effort to justify that school choice works (Glass, 2014; Lubienski & Brewer, 2018; Vasquez Heilig, 2018).

The Politics of the Community Use of Market-Based School Choice Research

Discussing research use specifically regarding school choice requires some understanding of the broader dynamics of educational research use in communities. In particular, educational research contains inherent tensions between evidence and democracy. Researchers often produce knowledge without much attention to impacted communities, aside from their role as research subjects, especially within the assessment-based RCT trials discussed above. While some researchers are expanding their approaches, communities often remain external to conversations about the overall agenda, research questions, decisions about what counts as evidence, and the knowledge production process (Brewer, Vasquez Heilig, Gunderson, & Brown, 2018). An additional problem is that research often resides behind paywalls, further isolating it from the public. In an applied field like education, this problem is a core issue because many practitioners often face barriers to improving practice or making effective decisions. In the heavily politicized space of school choice, the power dynamic between the policy patrons and the often disadvantaged communities targeted by school choice policies further exacerbates the issue.

The general disconnect between research and practitioners, and communities to an even greater extent, has resulted in a relative paucity of peer-reviewed research use. This disconnect occurs despite mandates for community engagement in the 2015 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) and private foundations such as W.T. Grant supporting work to better understand and promote knowledge use and evidence-based policymaking. For instance, ESSA delegates significant decision-making to the states and local communities, requiring that “stakeholders”—from state and local agencies to parents and community members—be engaged in making decisions about a wide range of policies. ESSA also requires that decisions related to implementing many aspects of the law be “evidence-based.” Thus, the mandate for greater stakeholder involvement that explicitly uses research exists; however, in reality, both community engagement and evidence-informed decision-making vary in uptake and quality.

What does this context mean for our nation’s communities within the domain of school choice? Importantly, it means that school choice policies are often enacted without a strong research base, as occurred in the largest market-based school choice adoption to date in the city of New Orleans. Paul Vallas, former head of the Recovery School District in New Orleans, framed the takeover of the district by stating, “This will be the greatest experiment in choice, in charters, and in creating not only a school system, but also a system of schools” (as cited in Hendrie, 2007, para. 3). This decision was not made with democratic community input; rather, it occurred through state takeover and included the firing of over 7,000 teachers (Adamson, Cook-Harvey, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). In fact, then-Governor Kathleen Blanco characterized the Hurricane Katrina disaster as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” that could “turn a failing system into a model for the nation” (Robelen, 2005, para. 3). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (as cited in Anderson, 2010) would also later characterize Katrina as the “best thing for New Orleans Schools” (para. 1).

The example of New Orleans is instructive, because it shows how choice policies have been scaled without examining the research or authentic community input. In fact, the Louisiana Department

of Education purposefully gave data only to organizations deemed to be politically friendly (e.g., CREDO) to the market-based reforms in New Orleans. Doug Harris and the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans were also provided early and exclusive access. This is why the Alliance was able to release a series of papers over time (e.g., Harris & Larsen, 2018) that have typically found small, positive effects of the education reform approaches that empowered large-scale private management of public schools in New Orleans.

Baker (2018) challenged the Alliance's results as "misguided" (p. 1) based on a variety of methodological critiques and general cautions related to internal and external validity of the research. Furthermore, in contrast to the special access granted CREDO and the Alliance, members of the research community have had to sue the Louisiana Department of Education in state court to obtain New Orleans data to independently analyze the reform (Andrews, 2013). The lack of publicly available data for the general public to conduct research outside of the set of hand-selected organizations led to a paucity of independent research about New Orleans until recent years (see also Chapter 9 of this volume).

There is also little existing evidence from communities that vouchers have a positive effect on student performance (see Chapter 17 of this volume). Carnoy (2017) concluded in a recent Economic Policy Institute report that the predominance of peer-reviewed research over 25 years shows vouchers do not improve student success. The most prominent example of voucher implementation in the world has taken place in Chile (Portales & Vasquez Heilig, 2014). Peer-reviewed research provides a cautionary tale of Chile's decades-long voucher experiment, including its designation as an "apartheid" education system by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Hidalgo & Gomez, 2016). Furthermore, a global metanalysis of 268 empirical studies of different types of public-private partnerships (PPPs) found "more negative than positive results in most measured impacts. Market-oriented PPPs (including voucher schemes, charter schools and other types of pro-'school choice' programmes) seem to be especially problematic in terms of education inequalities, inclusion, and school segregation" (Verger & Moschetti [2017], pp. 254-255). From both the domestic and international spheres, then, evidence from communities on voucher effectiveness remains limited and shows concerns about inequities within voucher projects. However, even though Chileans have engaged in large-scale street protests against the national education system and sought the elimination of for-profit schools, many still support vouchers despite problematic research findings (Portales & Vasquez Heilig, 2015).

As outlined above, policy decisions to deploy choice models lack a research base because the predominance of the literature does not support the market-based approaches. Therefore, policy decisions are based on other factors, including but not limited to politics, profit, and even anti-labor motivations. So how do market-based school choice policies come to fruition without an empirical foundation? Within the political sphere, the policy patrons have contributed to political campaigns in races from local school boards to the state house, with the politicians then enacting school choice policies. Examples include Oakland's school board races, where school choice proponent groups spent over \$200,000 in 2014 and over \$700,000 in 2016 (City of Oakland, 2016; ACOE, 2016). In Los Angeles, charter school support groups spent over \$9 million in 2017, while the 2018 California governor primary race attracted over \$17 million from the policy patrons in support of Antonio Villaraigosa (Blume & Poston, 2017; Hart, 2018). Of these examples, only Villaraigosa failed to win, while education decisions in both Oakland and Los Angeles continue to enact market-based school choice policies, primarily in the form of charter schools.

Astroturfing organizations, fake grassroots, have sought to create connections between the policy patrons and communities. Yet, their use of pro-school choice research does not necessarily represent authentic community engagement according to parents and community members who have

expressed concern about organizations that receive hundreds of thousands of dollars from policy patrons such as the WFF. Collins and Adamcikova (2018) relayed:

Right-wing billionaires and Silicon Valley technology investors have helped fund advocacy groups like Innovate, a San Jose group that pushes the charter agenda and denigrates public schools. Innovate is paying for Facebook and Twitter ads and hiring “community organizers” to convince parents of color that charter schools are on their side. (para. 12)

Similar concerns about funding and intent have been expressed about Parent Revolution, an organization funded by millions from the Broad, Walton, and Gates foundations—and at least 15 other education reform organizations. Parent Revolution has purveyed research about market-based school choice into policy conversations in California and across the nation (Cohn, 2013). The organization initially lobbied for California’s 2010 Parent Empowerment Act, often called the parent trigger law, which allows for a majority of parents to vote to turn over a neighborhood public school to a charter school. The Center for Education Organizing at Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2012) reported that the American Legislative Exchange Council—a coalition of legislators, businesses, and foundations that has consistently promoted private control and privatization model legislation (i.e., vouchers, charters) for education—also voted to embrace the parent trigger, which led to its introduction in 17 states and became law in five (Texas, Ohio, Indiana, Mississippi, and Louisiana). Rogers, Lubienski, Scott, & Welner (2015) argued that the parent trigger ultimately thwarts continued, sustained community and parental involvement because it outsources school governance to educational management organizations that have no obligation to (and often no physical presence in) the community. Despite the critiques of their agenda, Parent Revolution (n.d.) relays in a report that the organization is creating and disseminating research focused on encouraging market-based school choice “for all families” (p. 3).

How have communities responded to astroturfing organizations heavily funded by policy patrons and purveying market-based school choice research? At the local and national levels, community-based organizations have recognized that school choice policies adversely impact public education. Recently, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (2016) called for a moratorium on charter schools until the impact is better understood and more transparency and accountability can be integrated into public policy. The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) formed a national coalition of community and labor groups to advocate for a variety of policies, such as investment in public schools (AROS, 2018). Within the AROS umbrella, a group called Journey for Justice Alliance (J4J), comprising community members and grassroots organizations in 21 cities, set out to halt the progression of market-based school choice models, demanding “community-driven alternatives to the privatization of and dismantling of public school systems” (J4J, 2018).

J4J’s membership list illustrates the documented footprint of school choice and privatization across the country: Atlanta; Baltimore; Boston; Chicago; Detroit; Eupora, Mississippi; Hartford, Connecticut; Los Angeles and Oakland; Minneapolis; Camden, Elizabeth, Jersey City, Newark, and Patterson, New Jersey; New Orleans; New York City; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh; Washington D.C.; and Wichita (J4J, 2018). Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2016) explained their approach:

The policies of the last fifteen years, driven more by private interests than by concern for our children’s education, are devastating our neighborhoods and our democratic rights . . . Across our cities and school districts, our public schools are being closed. Students are being displaced and families are losing access to neighborhood schools. Sometimes closure is based on student academic performance. Sometimes it is rationalized by under-enrollment

or financial needs. But in every case—every time a neighborhood public school is closed—students’ education is disrupted and communities are destabilized. (pp. 140–141)

The coalition has sought to engage academics and also has conducted its own community-based research to create an important counter-narrative to the political framing and studies being utilized to justify school closures and charter and voucher proliferation (Brewer et al., 2018). For example, in a research brief entitled *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, they conducted Grassroots Voices Listening Projects in Boston, Caguas (Puerto Rico), Chicago, Detroit, Jersey City, Newark, and Paterson, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Paul, and Washington D.C. to “lift up the voices of the people directly affected” (J4J, 2014, p. 1). J4J (2014) found that school closings and charter school openings disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx students, schools, and communities across the U.S. (see also Paino, Boylan & Renzulli, 2017).

A number of community-based organizations, such as the NAACP, have also filed complaints under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act with the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights and utilized research to demand that it investigate the racial impact of public school closings in these cities and student assignment under choice schemes (Hurdle, 2013). However, with the appointment of school choice advocate Betsy DeVos as U.S. secretary of education, for whom market-based choice policies are a top priority, the federal oversight role is being scaled back in communities across the nation, especially in the area of civil rights (Wermund, 2018).

Conclusion

Market-based education reform has gained momentum from a comingling of ideology, methods, and funding fomented by allied political actors. The school choice movement has provided a strong foundation for the expansion of private control and privatization during the past two decades and has sought justification of that support through research funded by and within the reform network (Vasquez Heilig & Clark, 2018). Yet, the use of research within the domain of school choice in communities is often a more severe case of the disconnect between research, practice, and policy. The lack of strong, positive research evidence on market-based school choice does not support its implementation at scale; nevertheless, the approach has rapidly been integrated into education policy.

Countervailing interests of profit and labor disruption, with the political support of the neoliberal policy patrons and their local allies, has created an environment of expanding school choice policies (Brewer et al., 2018). The broad and interconnected network of policy patrons and school choice supporters reveals different agendas that have joined under Friedman’s ideological approach. Some groups, such as Learn Capital, are focused on education as a potential profit center with \$600 million in expenditures per year in the U.S. and over \$4.5 trillion per year globally (Hutter, 2014). Corporations interested in education privatization have publicly expressed that education is a low-risk growth market because profit is derived from private management of secure, long-term government expenditures. Because educators and staff represent by far the largest percentage of spending in education, profit-seekers often look to reduce labor costs while not reducing government costs. Such methods include displacing professional educators and staff with cheaper, uncertified ones (as happened in New Orleans) or replacing them partially or entirely with technology (Adamson et al., 2016). As a result, because educator and staff displacement reduces union power, organizations with anti-labor models, such as the Walmart Corporation, have taken an interest in school choice policies from a neoliberal and conservative orthodoxy (Rich, 2014).

Indeed, the WFF and other foundations that back market-based education reforms have not only spent millions to support scholars who have historically produced favorable research about such reforms. They are now also funding media by spending millions on websites such as The74million, Education

Post, LA School Report—and even Education Week. The media spending purports to provide (as cited in Schneider, 2017, para. 2) a “fact-based national discussion” about school choice policies and their private control and privatization impacts, even if such an explicit link and funding often remain unstated.

The election of Donald Trump and his selection of Betsy DeVos has made education reform more partisan. This has galvanized community organizations and politicians, both locally and nationally, to attempt to preserve democratically controlled public education as an American institution by engaging in the political discourse using research (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2018). EducationNext (2017) found that informing respondents that “President Donald Trump has expressed support for charter schools” lifted Republican support by 15 percentage points while reducing it by 3 percentage points among Democrats. The turnout in the national political leadership of market-based school choice has placed individuals from the left of the political spectrum (e.g., Derrell Bradford, Senator Corey Booker), who have supported—even led—DFER and Black Alliance for Educational Options, in a thorny position as they are finding it increasingly difficult to foment the market-based school choice agenda in community-based organizations and their political circles (Bradford, 2017).

In the current political environment, the laden political ideology reimagining education as an individualistic good rather than a collective one is becoming more apparent and problematic for market-based school choice proponents. Political talking heads, foundations, and other advocates supportive of research to undergird market-based school choice have even begun to pull back from using research as a justification for their ideology. For example, considering that the widespread market-based reforms have not created the outstanding results that were proffered more than a decade ago in New Orleans and elsewhere (Adamson et al., 2016; Baker, 2018), it is notable that Schneider and Menefee-Libey (2018) argued that supporters of the education reform and market-based school choice are now claiming that extensive failure and a lack of evidence is an “acceptable part of the entrepreneurial process” (final para.). So while some education reformers may be hedging and increasingly nonchalant about research-based evidence, in academia the quantification of the human condition and experience seeks to provide clearer understandings and utilize research evidence to inform legislative and financial changes. The pursuit of knowledge offers the opportunity to cast social phenomena in education into the realm of science in the never-satiable quest for certainty and generalizability. Inevitably, the market-based education reform movement has run into political challenges that are linked directly to academia’s and the broad citizenry’s desire for truth.

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