



REVIEW OF *THE EDUCATION CHOICE AND COMPETITION INDEX*

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Summary of Review

In this report the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution presents the results of a self-developed Education Choice and Competition Index (ECCI) along with an interactive application that grades large school districts according to the ECCI. The index is composed of 13 pro choice criteria. The authors present the ECCI as a new approach to education policy, but the ideas are not new. The report repeats many of the same arguments and logic found in other pro-market publications over the past 25 years. The sole unique recommendation is to permit “popularity” to serve as an adequate standard to judge school quality and a sufficient criterion by which to direct taxpayer dollars. Yet, this recommendation also harkens back to previous calls, common in the 1990’s, for unregulated school choice policies. The ECCI assumes benefits of market competition, but these benefits depend on how parents choose schools, and the report includes no research on how parents make school choice decisions. It is also devoid of any evidence that higher scores on the ECCI are related to the outcomes that the authors predict. In fact, the only large district with an “A” rating per the ECCI received a “D” according to its state accountability system. In essence, the report reads like an essay in support of free-market choice policies. Because of the dated assumptions and the subjective nature of the index, the study and its rankings fall short of being an effective policy tool.

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REVIEW OF *THE EDUCATION CHOICE AND COMPETITION INDEX*

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I. Introduction

The report, *The Education Choice and Competition Index: Background and Results 2012*, was authored by Grover J. Whitehurst and Sarah Whitfield of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institute (Brookings Institute).¹ The report provides the background information for the construction of the Education Choice and Competition Index (ECCI). According to the authors, “The ECCI provides an informative and consumer-relevant measure of the degree of choice and competition within the geographical boundaries of large school districts” (p.4). The ECCI grades school districts based on thirteen categories such as, the availability of alternatives to traditional public schools (e.g. charter schools and affordable private schools), whether the district has closed more than 3% of traditional public schools in the past five years, whether parents are forced to choose schools and the quality/availability of school-level test scores. The ECCI is a recommendation from a 2010 report from the Brookings Institute entitled, “Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education.”² The 2010 report was reviewed by Professor Janelle Scott of the University of California, Berkeley.³

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report refers to the 2010 Brookings Institute report but does not include any substantiated findings. It is not an original research report. The authors do assert a number of attributes and advantages, of sorts, about the purpose and utility of the ECCI. They argue that competitive pressures from parent-consumers is an innovative new wave of education reform in the wake of the failure of other reform efforts, namely top-down accountability and local control. However, neither the logic nor the conclusions are new or innovative. Rather, they are a replay of the same pro-market rhetoric that the public and policymakers have heard for the past 25 years – namely that schools should act like private businesses and that the self-interested behavior of parent consumers alone can transform public education.

The ECCI itself is comprised of thirteen categories, each of which includes specific criteria.⁴ School districts are assigned points based on the number of criteria they meet in each category. Three categories (alternatively available schools, assignment mechanism and application) are assigned double weight in the grade calculation in order to “reflect the importance of those categories to school choice relative to other categories” (p. 8).⁵ However, no specific rationale is provided for the double weighting of these specific categories. The composite score is then converted into a traditional A-F letter grade.

Similar to other arguments in favor of market-based education reforms, the report offers parental exit and market competition as a virtual panacea for nearly all education problems. According to the authors, market-based competition can “fundamentally change” public education by promoting equity, increasing productivity and efficiency and encouraging innovation.

The only novel contribution in the report is the explicit recommendation that “popularity” serve as a measure of judging school quality and as a sufficient criterion by which to direct

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taxpayer dollars, The recommendations hearken back to previous calls, prominent in the 1990s’s, for unregulated school choice policies that encouraged parents to “vote with their feet” in order to interject market-like discipline into public education. Now, nearly two decades later, the authors retread this same argument, “Unpopular schools would lose students and their associated revenue. If they did not figure out how to provide a more satisfying product they would eventually close. Popular schools would prosper and grow” (p. 2).

Finally, to encourage parental exit, the authors advocate for school assignment procedures where “everyone must choose” (p. 5) and there is no default school assignment. This policy effectively coerces parents to choose, even if they have not expressed a desire to switch schools.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The rationale to support the argument that market competition will achieve the purported improvements has become somewhat standard and can be found in most of the pro-market literature. The authors contend that 1) poor and minority students are trapped in traditional public schools, 2) the discipline of the market will produce the same productivity and efficiencies in public schools as has been witnessed in the private sector and 3) competition in public education breeds innovation. To support the use of parent satisfaction as a school quality indicator, the authors write, “If you believe that our education system is to a significant degree about satisfying those it serves and those who

pay for it through their tax dollars, we should give weight to the desire of parents to choose their children's schools and to the satisfaction that is generated by allowing them to do so" (p. 2).

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The only citation in the report is to the 2010 Brookings Institute report discussed in the Introduction.⁶ The report would be more credible if it considered the substantial body of research that directly relates to the authors' central claims.

To begin, the recommendations are premised on parental school choice behaviors. There is a lengthy body of research on how parents choose schools that should be but is not addressed in this report.⁷

Further, the report does not cite any research on what parents consider when judging their level of satisfaction with the school(s) their children attend. Through independent and outside sources, the authors should make a defensible case that when parents satisfy their individual schooling preferences, such actions lead to the type of collective outcomes that the authors contend will occur.

The report should also address the existing research on previous coercive school choice policies that compel parents to choose. Most recently, under the No Child Left Behind Act, parents in low performing schools were given the option to transfer schools at district expense. Yet, less than 1% of eligible parents availed themselves of the opportunity.⁸ The authors do not make their case as to why their version of coerced school choice would prove more successful than past attempts.

The report is devoid of any research on educational policy from which either parents or policymakers can take action. Further, the index appears unworkable. For example, there is no guidance on how educational policy should respond to the elements of the ECCI, namely those elements that hold school districts accountable for factors that are beyond district control, such as the presence of affordable private schools.⁹

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report does not involve any original research and, as such, the methods are restricted to what could be called a "scoring guide." The recommendations for the ECCI categories, weights, tallies and letter grades appear to be based on the professional opinion of authors chosen by the Brookings Institute. Readers are not privy to how the criteria or the authors were selected and the extent to which there was an attempt to include a diverse perspective of opinions.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

There are a number of large unanswered questions that leave the reader skeptical. To begin, the authors make no substantiated connection between parental satisfaction and the purported collective benefits that they argue should arise from market-based policies. For example, the “winning” school district, meaning the only large school district in the country rated an “A” according to the ECCI is Recovery School District, New Orleans. Yet, the district was labeled a “D” by the Louisiana Department of Education and 83% of its schools were labeled a “D” or “F.”¹⁰

Further, the recommendations place ultimate faith on parents choosing schools based on test score results. Yet, it is well established that parents choose schools based on many other factors, such as safety, academic mission and student demographics. In addition, formal sources of information, such as standardized test scores and state-derived labels like those promoted by the authors, are one of the last sources that parents consider when making decisions. Again, there is a large body of literature as to why parents choose that is not addressed here. For example, Schneider and Buckley studied parents’ school search preferences and found that they placed considerably more emphasis on student demographics when researching schools than academic performance results, such as test scores.¹¹

The foundational logic of this report is based on how one would expect consumers to behave in the private sector. More specifically, the assumption is that when presented with comparable standardized test scores, parents will leave their present school. Parental responses under previous coerced choice plans, however, do not match consumer behaviors. Most often, when schools are labeled as low-performing by the state based on test scores, most parents stay.¹² And, unlike any consumer-business relationship, involved parents may do something that is literally unheard of in the private sector; they get more involved in order to improve their school.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report is representative of school choice thought from a quarter-century ago in its call for unregulated, popularity based school choice plans. The recommendations do not utilize well-known and extensive current research on what we know about how parents choose schools nor does the study reflect awareness of current developments in school choice policies. With general market failures, the lukewarm reception to other coerced school choice proposals and mistrust of the for-profit education market, the ground has shifted on these issues. The more common position among education policy experts is for regulated school choice policies that balance individual preferences and social benefits. The weaknesses of the ECCI (particularly the subjective scoring system and the absence of a sound research foundation), renders the index an artifact that provides little help in guiding current policy or practice.

Notes and References

1 Whitehurst, G.J., & Whitfield, S. (2012). *The Education Choice and Competition Index*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/interactives/2012-ecci#divDistrictTable>.

2 Greene, J., et. al. (February, 2010). *Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute. Retrieved December 22, 2012, from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/2/02%20school%20choice/0202_school_choice.pdf.

3 Scott, J. (2010, March). *Review of "Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education,"* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-expanding-choice>.

4 The 13 categories that comprise the ECCI include (total points possible in parenthesis): Availability of alternative schools (3); virtual schools (3); popularity of schools reflected in funding (3); restructure or close undersubscribed schools (3); assignment mechanism (4); application (3); comparable standards and assessments (3); gain scores calculated (3); accessible on-line information (3); relevant performance data (3); understandable performance data (3); transportation (3); and district school quality (3).

5 Whitehurst, G.J., & Whitfield, S. (2012). *Education Choice and Competition Index Scoring Guide*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/11/30%20education%20choice%20whitehurst/1130_education_choice_whitehurst_ecci_scoring_guide.pdf.

6 The 2010 Brookings report (see Endnote 1) cites several academic articles and policy reports.

7 A few examples include:

Bell, C.A. (2009). All choices created equal? The role of choice sets in the selection of schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84, 191-208.;

Holme, J. J. (2002). Buying homes, buying schools: School choice and the social construction of school quality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(2), 177–207.;

Schneider, M., Teske, P., & Marschall, M. (2000). *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

8 Stullich, S., Eisner, E., McCrary, J. (2007). *National Assessment of Title I: Final Report* (NCEE 2008-4012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

9 According to the ECCI, the criteria require that charter schools and at least two of the following alternative education options are present in the school district: magnet schools, vouchers, affordable private schools and tax credit scholarships. In addition, school districts receive maximum points if 45% or more of the student population is enrolled in these alternative educational environments (see Category 1 in the report index, note 5).

10 Louisiana school and district accountability ratings are available online at:
http://www.louisianaschools.net/offices/publicaffairs/press_release.aspx?PR=1697.

11 Schneider, M. & Buckley, J. (2002, Summer). What do parents want from schools? Evidence from the Internet. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24 (2), 133-144.

12 For example, see Garcia, D.R. (November, 2010). *School Reenrollment: Choosing to Stay*. Phoenix, AZ: Morrison Institute for Public Policy.

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