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AUTHOR:	The Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation
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REVIEWER:	Christopher Lubienski
E-MAIL ADDRESS:	club@uiuc.edu
PHONE NUMBER:	(217) 333-4382

Summary of Review

A new annual report from the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation is designed as a resource to provide ammunition for persuading people as to the merits of school choice. While there may indeed be a number of reasons to argue for school choice, this handbook shoots blanks. The report provides updated information on thirteen states and the District of Columbia with policies that approximate the Friedman Foundation’s voucher-based version of school “choice.” While the descriptive compendium of information is mostly accurate and somewhat useful, the report begins and ends with “Frequently Asked Questions,” where the Foundation seeks to interpret the research on school choice issues for the lay reader. As might be expected from a voucher advocacy organization such as this, the report relies on a highly selective sub-sample of studies. The research referred to in the report tends toward non-peer-reviewed studies of questionable quality from other advocacy organizations, while ignoring evidence in these and other higher quality studies that questions the Foundation’s unequivocal support for vouchers. Evidence — particularly on the issue of achievement — is consistently abused in this report, both by misrepresenting individual studies (including those by voucher advocates) and misrepresenting the general body of research on choice. In short, for those hoping to learn more about the issue, this one-sided report does a poor job of even representing only one side of the debate.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

The *ABCs of School Choice* is an annual handbook produced by the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation to help people persuade others regarding the merits of school choice. The report exhibits fine production values, with glossy pictures and nice graphics, but it is rather wanting regarding content. The Friedman Foundation, which proudly proclaims its role as “the nation’s leading voucher advocates,” intends this as a reference resource with the “most up-to-date and accurate information” on the issue.¹ They hope that “you will refer to it over and over when you are combating opponents or seeking to persuade your friends that school choice works” (p. 5). The report lists policies and developments in the thirteen states (and the District of Columbia) that meet the Friedman Foundation’s definition of “choice,” and then briefly expounds on 10 issues related to choice in a section on “Frequently Asked Questions” — the section that is the focus of this review. Between the production values, the simplistic assertions, and the difficulty of verifying claims made in this report, it appears that the Friedman Foundation is aiming at a relatively un-informed audience, one that it hopes will spread the gospel of vouchers far, wide and without question.

It is important to note that when the Friedman Foundation writers discuss “choice,” they are really referring to purer market versions of these reforms — vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and tax credits or deductions. Just as Republican strategist and pollster Frank Luntz admonishes GOP policymakers against using the term “voucher” because of the public’s negative reaction to the term,² the Friedman Foundation report tends to use the positive word “choice” quite

frequently in lieu of the term “vouchers.” While this would seem like semantic maneuvering, it also reflects the Friedman Foundation’s agenda of purer market models for education. Consequently, this definition excludes other options that most parents and reformers would see as school “choice”: open-enrollment plans, magnet schools, and charter schools (the latter mistakenly described by the Friedman Foundation as “government-operated schools” (p. 7).

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

This is not an empirical report that analyzes data to produce results. Instead, it is a compendium of policies and a summary of studies explicitly intended and arranged to advance the cause of vouchers. There are 10 conclusions put forth in the section on Frequently Asked Questions, which are addressed below.

III. RATIONALES SUPPORTING THE REPORT’S FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The below discussion of the report’s FAQs includes an examination of the rationales underlying its conclusions and recommendations.

IV. THE REPORT’S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The Friedman Foundation report repeatedly implies that it is merely passing on a consensus from the research literature — drawing from “a large body of evidence” and “numerous polls,” for instance (pp. 54, 59). Unfortunately, throughout the report, virtually no citation information is provided for the studies it mentions. The report is often

impenetrable with respect to discerning which specific studies are being used to support claims when, in fact, one of the standard practices for social science research is to reference cited works, thus allowing interested readers to check the accuracy of the sources named in support of claims. In fact, this lack of citations adds to the impression that the Friedman Foundation expects an audience that will take the claims made in the report at face value.

The question of whether or not the studies cited incorporated rigorous research methods is highly debatable. What is not debatable is the fact that the Friedman Foundation report refers only to a very small sub-sample of a much broader and growing research literature on school choice. And this sub-sample is indisputably biased, as demonstrated by the fact that almost all the research cited was produced by a small number of acknowledged voucher advocates, and almost none of these studies were submitted to impartial peer-review — independent examination by scholars not affiliated with their organizations.

Here it is worthwhile to consider the individual questions and responses the Friedman Foundation includes in that section of the report, focusing in particular on the first question — achievement — which drives much of the interest in school choice.

1) Does school choice help students do better in school?

According to the Friedman Foundation: “Absolutely!” (p. 54). The report suggests that students who make a choice, through the use of a voucher, perform at a higher level than they otherwise would. The implication here is that the mere existence of a choice option causes a child to perform at a higher level in school. Yet this is not empir-

ically supportable; a voucher in itself teaches nothing. Voucher advocates like those at the Friedman Foundation often conflate the option to choose a school with an educational “treatment,” assuming that a choice itself or the governance model has an impact on learning, ignoring the fact that the learning they are interested in documenting takes place in the classroom.³ What they are actually suggesting is that transferring to a more effective school will enhance learning for a given child. And that assumes that one type of school — those outside the public sector, in the Friedman Foundation’s view — are necessarily better than the other (the public school). The problem with this reasoning is that it finds little useful support in the research literature, despite what the Friedman Foundation would have us believe.⁴ The Friedman Foundation nonetheless makes this assertion repeatedly and without evidence: “private schools do a better job” (p. 56); “one of the most important reasons private schools do a better job than public schools is that they’re free from these restrictions” (p. 58); “[private schools] offer a superior education and other attractions that parents want for their children but can’t get at public schools” (p. 66). Instead of repeating such general (and inaccurate) claims about different types of schools, the Friedman Foundation should provide empirical evidence. But the report fails to do this.

When the Friedman report moves away from broad and baseless generalizations about public and private schools to a discussion about voucher programs, it cites “[s]even studies using random assignment, the gold standard for social science, [which] have found statistically significant gains in academic achievement from vouchers, and no such study has ever found negative effects” (p. 52). This is the heart of the Friedman Foundation’s argument regarding the benefits of choice; indeed, it is the core argument

of the whole report.

But there are at least two major problems with the body of evidence presented in support of this ardent claim. First, the Friedman Foundation either ignores or is unaware of the substantial methodological problems and limitations with most of the studies cited. These are problems which have been highlighted and discussed extensively by more careful observers, and which may account for the fact that only two of the achievement studies cite in the Friedman Foundation report have been published in peer-reviewed journals (and these two are more balanced in their findings than is represented in the report). A related problem with the presentation in the Friedman report is it misleadingly characterizes the overall import of the research, including the research from voucher advocates; even in the best light, that research suggests only minimal achievement benefits from vouchers. Secondly, the Friedman Foundation, selective in its use of research, neglects to cite high-quality studies, several of which have been published in peer-reviewed journals, which seriously undermine the contention that choice necessarily raises academic achievement.

On the first issue, it is worthwhile to consider at some length the methodological issues or problems evident in some of the studies mentioned, and the misrepresentation of two of these studies by the Friedman Foundation report.⁵ The Friedman Foundation report points to seven studies that purportedly prove that vouchers somehow cause students to “do better in school” (p. 52). Although citation information in the report is scant, it typically — indeed, overwhelmingly — points to studies from the Manhattan Institute and from a group of researchers at Harvard University. Moreover, this same group of studies is referred to repeatedly in the pro-voucher advocacy literature,⁶

so an educated guess allows some investigation into the strength of the Friedman claims.

It turns out that all but two of the studies were conducted by researchers affiliated with the admittedly pro-voucher Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) at Harvard — directed by a policy advocate who describes his group as a “band of Jedi attackers” fighting for school choice.⁷ Because these studies support the central point of the Friedman report, the following paragraphs explore them in some detail.

■ The Friedman Foundation report points to “a 1998 Harvard study” as proof that “random-assignment methods” demonstrate superior academic outcomes for students using vouchers to attend private schools (p. 52). In fact, the PEPG paper referred to in the Friedman Foundation report was not peer-reviewed,⁸ and it drew criticism for adopting a random assignment model and neglecting issues of sample size, attrition, and reporting.⁹ While random assignment models can be useful in measuring the effects of a treatment when compared to a similar population denied that treatment, if the populations are unstable — that is, if one or both of the groups is reduced during the treatment in ways that may corrupt the comparability of the two groups — then conclusions drawn from the comparison regarding the treatment are tenuous, at best. This is exactly the case with the PEPG study cited in the Friedman Foundation report, where the treatment (voucher) group lost almost one-half of its students within the first year, thereby fatally compromising the integrity of the randomization. Nevertheless, the PEPG study made strong (but unsustainable) conclusions based on only 80 some students — meaning that some grade levels had just a few “treatment” students — despite the fact that the experimental group, suffering heavy attrition of

students returning to the public schools, was no longer comparable to the control group in the “random assignment” model.

■ The Friedman Foundation report mentions a “1998 study by Cecilia Rouse of Princeton” in noting “that voucher students improved more than the control group by eight points in math over four years” (p. 52). Indeed, the Rouse study found some gains for students using vouchers,¹⁰ but Rouse herself suggested that these gains may be attributable not to private schools being inherently more effective than public schools, but to the fact that private schools tended to have smaller classes.¹¹ In fact, Rouse also noted (although the Friedman Foundation fails to mention this) that gains for students using vouchers for private schools were similar to — *or outpaced by* — gains for public school students in classes similar in size to those in private schools. The Friedman Foundation also fails to note that Rouse then endorsed class size as a more effective alternative than choice.¹²

■ The third study apparently referred to by the Friedman report was conducted by Jay Greene, a research affiliate at PEPG. His investigation of graduation rates in Milwaukee was commissioned and published by a voucher advocacy group — not a peer-reviewed journal.¹³ The report compares apples and oranges: students choosing to attend private schools using vouchers were compared to non-choosers. Since the private school voucher students had, by definition, demonstrated a commitment to their education through the act of choosing, researchers would expect them to follow through on their investment and be more likely to graduate, as is the case. Similar findings were evident when Greene examined selective public schools. But the Greene study conflated two research questions, confusing one with the other. His study provided evidence

for the obvious point that students from families actively engaged in their children’s education are more likely to graduate, as any informed observer would expect. Yet it claims to provide evidence concerning the value of vouchers or private schools. A reader of his study would have no way of disentangling the two causal mechanisms or of deciding whether the latter added anything to the former. Moreover, Greene failed to consider differences in graduation requirements in different schools, as well as demographic differences in the enrollment at different schools.

■ The Friedman Foundation report also refers to Greene and Forster’s 2003 study, cited to demonstrate that participants in a Florida voucher program were more satisfied when they used a voucher.¹⁴ This finding would be predicted by other social science research suggesting that the simple power to choose may increase satisfaction regardless of — or even in spite of — actual outcomes.¹⁵ Again, the study in question did not appear in a peer-reviewed journal. No mention is made of the significant methodological problems of using survey research and self-reported measures of satisfaction as a metric of program effectiveness or success. Finally, the study says nothing regarding academic achievement, which is the basic Friedman claim.

■ The Friedman Foundation report refers to a “2002 Harvard study” of a privately funded voucher program in New York City (p. 53).¹⁶ This study was conducted by the same core group of PEPG researchers mentioned earlier.¹⁷ Although the PEPG director of the study publicly reported significant academic gains for students using vouchers, other researchers (including independent researchers at Mathematica who worked with PEPG on the study) offered much more cautionary conclusions. A re-analysis of the

data by Princeton economists concluded that the gains were non-robust, were evident only when reported as averages, were restricted to only one group in one grade (suggestive of a statistical fluke), and are dependent on highly questionable classifications and treatment of data, such as the omission of about 40% of the data.¹⁸

■ Another study of the privately funded New York voucher program is noted in the Friedman Foundation report as proof that “after only one year in the program voucher students improved 4.7 percentile points more than the control group in math” (p. 53). This study does have some merit. It was peer-reviewed, and it found a statistically significant benefit. But it also has important and acknowledged limitations, which the Friedman report fails to bring to the attention of its readers. Interestingly, the study in question was an attempt to address some of the serious methodological issues that plagued the PEPG attempts to study this program, including the substantial problem of missing data, and the fact that (as with Milwaukee) many students did not remain in their randomly assigned group.¹⁹ The study was funded by a number of pro-voucher organizations (including the Friedman Foundation — a fact that the Friedman Foundation fails to disclose in this report but which is clearly set forth on the first page of the underlying article). It found relative gains for some groups in mathematics, but, as the authors of the study noted: “Results from our model in the school choice study do not indicate strong treatment effects for most of the subgroups examined,” finding “no advantages in reading, but some mathematics gains for some students from certain schools.”²⁰

■ The final study mentioned in the Friedman Foundation report was also conducted by Jay Greene, and was published in the

Hoover Institution’s *Education Next*, a “journal of opinion and research” edited by the director of PEPG.²¹ The study looked at a privately funded voucher program in Charlotte, North Carolina. But the data and analyses are so flawed that the study is virtually meaningless. In particular, the comparison groups are in no way comparable — issues of selection bias are overwhelming. Well over half of the students awarded a voucher did not use it. Only 40% of the students applying to the program — the pool from which the random assignments groups are constructed — participated in the study, and participation rates varied widely between groups. Greene attempted to dismiss these issues by comparing the groups on a single variable,²² and then noted that “test score data were adjusted statistically”²³ — but the report never describes how the statistical adjustments were done. (Transparency of methods and replicability are gold standards of social science research — much more so than random assignment.) The author merely tries to convince readers that students were “quite similar on observed as well as (in all likelihood) unobserved characteristics”²⁴ — a difficult claim to sustain since something (neither Greene nor the reader knows what) caused more than half of the voucher awardees to fail to enroll in a private school, and caused 60% of the participants to fail to participate on the tests for the study. Again, Greene tries to assure his readers that the groups are comparable, since “All families were motivated enough to complete an application for a scholarship.” But there is a big difference between filling out a form and committing to getting one’s child to a school across town everyday — a commitment contingent on parental resources of time and transportation that are not evenly distributed across groups. This leads one to suspect that unobservable differences between groups existed and became apparent as the study progressed, despite attempts to sweep them

under the rug. Furthermore, the author points to interviews to claim that students were rarely refused admission to, or expelled from, private schools — a practice that would further bias the sample. However, it would seem that families with children who were rejected or expelled would likely be in the 60% of the people who refused to participate in the study; so claims based on the survey of the remaining 40% are next to meaningless. Finally, the author credits any advantage for the choice students to the private schools they attended, and failed to control for peer effects, which may better account for differences in test scores apart from the type of school attended (see below).

In connection with many of the above studies, it is worth noting that random assignment methods are more problematic than the Friedman authors would have their readers believe. While many advocates have claimed that random assignment is the “gold standard” in social science research, the approach runs into serious methodological problems when applied to schooling — problems that voucher advocates are eager to ignore. The advantage of random assignment is that unobservable differences between students attending public and private schools are diminished through the randomization process, which would make the comparison groups essentially similar in all respects, except for the treatment they received (the type of school attended). And yet these studies are plagued by the fact the many (often the majority) of the students awarded a voucher never use it, or soon return to public schools — seriously corrupting the integrity of comparisons across groups. Another well-known issue in such studies is the tendency for participants randomly selected for a study to try harder, while those randomly put into the control group may be disappointed, which might

influence their motivation.

In addition, the random assignment model lauded by the Friedman Foundation report ascribes differences in student achievement to some (always unexplained) difference in the programs at public and private schools. And yet those specific differences are almost never examined; instead, readers are left to assume that private schools are somehow superior in their effectiveness. In fact, one of the most obvious differences between public and private schools is that private schools educate a higher proportion of students from more affluent families — students with characteristics (motivation, esteem for education, etc.) that are associated with higher academic performance no matter what kind of schools they attend. Since the voucher programs mentioned in the Friedman Foundation report move students from urban public schools into private schools, the students are exposed to a wealthier peer group, which is likely to have a beneficial impact on voucher students, *regardless of whether or not it is a private school*. That is, these random assignment studies credit school effectiveness, while not controlling for the well-known peer effect. Students would enjoy the benefits of an enhanced peer effect whenever they transfer to a more affluent school, regardless of whether it is public or private.

On the second point, while the Friedman Foundation cites seven random assignment studies, very few are peer-reviewed in respected academic journals, and the two that are (neither conducted by PEPG authors) are misrepresented in the Friedman Foundation report. While the report cherry-picks favorable findings from these studies, it ignores myriad instances where the studies cited — including those done by voucher advocates — failed to find evidence of a voucher effect. And in the few where researchers are able to find an effect, it tends to be quite

modest, at best. Moreover, the Friedman Foundation report ignores a number of high-quality studies, some in peer-reviewed journals, which call into question the assumption that private or independent school test scores are a result of superior academic effectiveness.²⁵ Much of the research not cited by the Friedman Foundation shows minimal or no sector effects (differences between achievement caused by the school being public or private), and in fact shows differences in student achievement to be much greater within, rather than between, sectors due to the wide range of socioeconomic concentrations in American schools. In fact, while the Friedman Foundation report claims that academic achievement in voucher plans does not suffer (a flaccid justification for vouchers, to be sure), several of these studies — including three of the largest studies conducted on this issue²⁶ — show most types of private schools and schools based on choice are underperforming relative to public schools.

Although fair review of the research literature tosses cold water on the Friedman report's achievement claims, this is not to say that choice is bad. Any honest review only demonstrates that the glowing summary of research provided in that report is highly biased and does not reflect the more nuanced and complex picture presented by a balanced look at the evidence on achievement.

2) Does school choice make public schools better?

Extolling competition, the Friedman Foundation report rests on the assumption that the threat from competition will force teachers to be more effective. The report claims that “Not one empirical study has ever found that outcomes at U.S. public schools got worse when exposed to school choice, and numer-

ous studies have found that they improve” (p. 54). This is not true. For instance, in the most recent, rigorous study on this issue in the U.S., Yongmei Ni employed a number of approaches to the issue of the impact of competition from charter schools on public schools in Michigan.²⁷ The results indicate a negative impact on public schools, which worsen as competition increases. Moreover, while the Friedman Foundation wants readers to look only at the U.S., research from other countries (including research conducted by U.S. researchers at Duke and Stanford) have found clear negative effects of choice. Other nations such as Chile, New Zealand, and the UK have gone further than the U.S. toward the Friedman prescription for universal choice, but research (much of it peer-reviewed), shows substantial social segregation resulting from choice, with poorer students left behind in schools that then accelerate their decline.²⁸

To be fair, a few studies have found small positive impacts associated with some types of choice,²⁹ but most peer-reviewed studies have found no measurable impacts on public school productivity.³⁰ Again, the Friedman Foundation has pointed readers to only a few studies, typically by pro-voucher advocates, which have failed to be published in mainstream, peer-reviewed journals. And again, this work has been seriously questioned on methodological grounds.³¹

3) Doesn't school choice drain resources from public schools?

The Friedman Foundation answers: “Absolutely not!” (p. 55). Aside from being false, this answer is also a bit disingenuous. After all, under the logic of the agenda advanced by the Friedman Foundation, unless schools were penalized for ineffectiveness through lost students and resources, there would be no incentive for them to improve. Neverthe-

less, the Friedman report offers calculations that attempt to show that spending in public schools has risen in recent years, suggesting that resources have not been drained from public schools.³² Depending on one's perspective, these calculations are either meaningless or misleading.

Any attempt to examine the effect of a given event on school spending is necessarily limited. Resources can be drained by the event (in this case, increased choice) even if spending rises due to other factors. Moreover, spending can increase but not rise proportionate to costs (if, for example, a district sees costs increase because it is asked to educate more special needs or students with limited English proficiency). But the question is largely one of budgeting: how does a state or federal legislature pay for the cost of vouchers for students to attend private schools? When the money comes from revenues that are designated for public schools, there is then a relative decline in the money spent on public school students. This is the case in Milwaukee and Cleveland, for instance, where the funds for vouchers have been appropriated from the state funds that were designated for those cities' public schools (as well as, in Wisconsin, for other districts in the state).³³ Increases in funding for districts with vouchers are then dependent primarily on increases in local tax rates.

Alternatively, a voucher system could be set up to hold public schools harmless, even if they lose students. But such a policy would, as noted above, undermine a key tenet of competition. If public schools don't suffer the effect of losing in the competition, according to the logic of market enthusiasts, then they will have no reason to try harder and to improve.

4) Are private schools that participate in school choice programs held accountable?

While the Friedman Foundation believes that they are, it depends largely on what model of accountability is being used. Voucher programs make schools accountable to the parents that choose them (knowing they could choose a different option), rather than to taxpayers and voters. The report seems to recognize market forces as the only true form of accountability. Whether that is a good or a bad thing is largely a normative question, but whether or not the shift in accountability models works to improve schools overall is an empirical one. In that respect, the Friedman Foundation makes some claims that are simply false.

The report claims that "parents have no way to hold [a public school] accountable" (p. 57). This hyperbole ignores the fact that public schools are among the most open public institutions: often begging parents to get involved, to talk with teachers and administrators, and allowing voters to elect (or recall) local school board members. The claim that most private schools undergo audits and submit to tests because "parents expect and demand it" obscures the fact that voucher advocates in Milwaukee fought for years to avoid subjecting their schools to standardized testing measures (which may have shown the schools in a poor light) (pp. 57, 59). The Friedman Foundation report itself include the argument that "one of the most important reasons private schools do a better job than public schools is that they're free from these restrictions" (p. 58).

The report then notes: "They can be creative in the classroom and more open to trying different approaches.... Private schools are good largely because they are free to innovate" (p. 58). No research is cited to support this contention. If the report were to have

looked to research, it might have found the studies — including that conducted by the pro-voucher Fordham Foundation — showing independent schools to be the least innovative.³⁴ In fact, choice proponents such as Diane Ravitch have claimed that public schools are too innovative.³⁵ Overall, the picture is much more mixed, with levels of innovation having little to do with school sector.

5) Will school choice turn a private school into an over-regulated public school?

Although the Friedman Foundation tries to calm concerns regarding creeping regulation, those concerns may well be valid. As tax-funded support for non-public schools increases in an age of increasing government intervention in schooling, it is possible that bureaucratic regulations will be applied to private schools accepting public funds. Indeed, it very well might be that private schools will accept regulation in return for public funds, as has happened in earlier expansions of the public school system in the 19th century.³⁶

6 & 7) Does the public really want school choice? Does a wide spectrum of Americans want school choice?

On these two questions, the Friedman Foundation report points to polls, correctly noting the sensitivity of the results to the specific wording of the questions. Typically, support for school choice declines when respondents are asked if “taxpayers,” rather than the “government,” should subsidize the cost of private schools. But the Friedman Foundation report fails to distinguish between parents and taxpayers in reporting on these studies, the latter group being much less supportive of school choice.³⁷ The Friedman Foundation report also ignores multiple polls that show American parents to be rela-

tively satisfied with their local public schools.

8) Is school choice constitutional?

The Friedman Foundation report notes that the U.S. Supreme Court addressed this question “resoundingly” (by a 5-4 vote) in 2002 (p. 64). However, the report fails to note that vouchers have recently been struck down as unconstitutional under state constitutions in Colorado and Florida. Moreover, most state constitutions include strongly worded provisions preventing the expenditure of public money on private, religious education.³⁸

9) Does school choice help special-education students?

While the Friedman Foundation believes so, it points only to one state (Florida) with vouchers — a program specifically targeted to children with special needs. (Utah also recently launched such a voucher program.) Again, the Friedman Foundation report refers only to research conducted by a voucher advocate — this time, a single, non-reviewed study. The survey data in the study did not focus on academic achievement and so were unable to show whether or not vouchers “help special-education students” in terms of academic gains. The study focuses instead on self-reported survey data regarding levels of satisfaction, an inherently unreliable approach (p. 65).

Perhaps more important to answering this question is the fact that “school choice,” generally speaking, looks very different from the unique vouchers in Florida. Since these Florida vouchers are adjusted to the costs of educating the individual child (as one could argue they should be), they range to upwards of \$20,000 — making the prospect of enrolling special needs students much more attractive for schools than is the

case with most other voucher programs. In fact, special-education students are drastically under-represented in private schools in the U.S., at least in part because private schools can exclude such students who cost more to educate, while public schools must provide the necessary resources to educate them.³⁹ Except in specialized cases, it is doubtful that we will see a wholesale movement of special education students into private schools unless voucher amounts are expanded dramatically. (Alternatively, private school operators might create specialized schools that essentially segregate special-needs students in order to access economies of scale).

10) Does school choice really lead to more integrated schools?

Again, on this final question, the Friedman Foundation report refers to a handful of studies by voucher advocates — none of which are peer-reviewed — to support an overly optimistic view of the research on school choice. This is particularly troubling given that multiple studies, many peer-reviewed, do not support the report’s unequivocal claim (p. 66). Instead, these studies suggest that choice may have increased segregation, both in other nations that have gone further down the route Friedman proposed, and in the U.S.⁴⁰

The Friedman Foundation rightly states that public schools are heavily segregated, and it also correctly notes that this is “primarily because of residential segregation” (p. 66). Indeed, while public schools generally must accept all students in their neighborhood, housing markets are segregated — not just by race, but also by socioeconomic status. Therefore, public school enrollments reflect private market choices.

Of course, creating education markets

through vouchers for private schools further animates such choices. And private schools can exclude students. Interestingly, Milton Friedman himself had to deal with this issue when he published his original essay outlining his call for school vouchers in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* decision.⁴¹ Acknowledging that choice would be used to avoid integration — which is exactly what happened as segregationists established White Flight Academies — Friedman asserted that this was preferable to state-sponsored integration plans.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT’S METHODS

Since this is a review of selected research in support of a policy agenda, there is no original research, nor is there a methodology.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

As noted above, the conclusions stated for each question in the Frequently Asked Questions section are supported by the research mentioned in the report, but the sample of research chosen is highly biased, and much of the research cited is of poor quality.

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

This handbook — or at least its FAQ section — is explicitly designed for consumption by readers with little or no knowledge of school choice issues, much less of research on school choice. Although the Friedman Foundation hopes that readers will use the report to convince others of the benefits of school choice, one would sincerely hope that policymakers and practitioners have a more sophisticated understanding of these issues so that they do not take such unsupported

claims at face value. A report on a contentious issue would typically include references to the studies cited, warnings about the ways data should be interpreted, a discussion of limitations on data and methods, and at least some acknowledgement of alternative perspectives and interpretations of the issue (even if only to challenge those interpretations). None of that is found here. A policy advocacy publication like this should always be read cautiously; the buyer should beware and should read the fine print. The problem here is that there is no fine print — there is only a glossy, highly attractive misrepresentation of the research literature.

Although the report makes much of random assignment models as a “gold standard” in

the social sciences, it ignores other basic social science conventions designed to ensure the quality and rigor in research: peer review, citation of sources, transparency of methods, and replicability.

While readers are invited by the Friedman Foundation to look to this report for answers to “all your questions about school choice” (p. 5), those readers would be well advised to first ask themselves three other questions: (1) Is this an organization with a pronounced advocacy position on the issue?, and (2) Is the research cited here overwhelmingly from similar advocacy groups, and (3) does it rise to a level of quality one would find in a peer-reviewed journal?

NOTES & REFERENCES

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⁴ See, for example,

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Grogger, J., & Neal, D. (2000). Further evidence on the effects of Catholic secondary schooling. In W. G. Gale & J. R. Pack (Eds.), *Brookings-Wharton Papers on Urban Affairs 2000* (pp. 151-202). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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