



The problem with “Bad voucher schools aren’t a problem”

By [Michael J. Petrilli](#)

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This week, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute released a “[toolkit](#)” for policymakers working to create or expand private-school-choice programs. In it, we argue that students receiving publicly funded scholarships or vouchers should take state assessments and that the results should be reported publicly. Private schools that consistently fail to improve student achievement in math and reading should become ineligible for public subsidies.

Predictably, some of our friends in the school-choice movement—especially those of a more libertarian persuasion—responded with a resounding “Thanks but no thanks.” [Jason Bedrick of the Cato Institute](#) acknowledged that our proposal is “well intentioned” but finds it “unpersuasive” and “likely to do [more] harm than good.” [Greg Forster](#), writing on Jay Greene’s blog, calls our proposal a “straddle.” [Robert Enlow](#), president of the Friedman Foundation, argues that public oversight of (publicly funded) private schools would be “prone to political decisions and special interests.” And even Matt Ladner, our comrade-in-arms in the [Common Core fight](#), thinks it’s [risky](#) to subject private schools to state accountability policies, given that the latter are such a mess.

None of these anxieties surprised us; in fact, we mention most of them in our toolkit. We understand why some worry that

- Private schools could feel pressure to conform to state standards, reducing or eliminating the educational diversity that makes them attractive (and effective) in the first place;
- Achievement-based accountability policies might kick low-performing schools out of choice programs that parents have selected for rational and important reasons (like safety); and
- Government oversight might block the development of a dynamic education marketplace that universal school choice could unleash.

But we have our own worries, too, which our colleagues don't seem to share. Namely,

Those are a lot of worries. But there's an important distinction between the first list and the second: The first set are all hypotheticals; the second set are all playing out, right now, in the real world.

We know this because Fordham is fortunate to be more than just a think tank (definition: a place where reality is examined to see if it accords with theory). We're also on the ground, in a real state (Ohio), and we spend time in real schools. And let me tell you: It ain't always pretty.

As we've written *ad nauseam*, Ohio's charter-school sector has earned a reputation as the "[Wild West](#)" (or Midwest) because of loose rules and lax oversight by government and its agents (the state's zillion "authorizers"). To be sure, there's innovation aplenty: Online schools are booming. Credit-recovery programs are full. For-profit operators appear to be making money. But the educational outcomes are generally atrocious. (That is, when the schools [even get off the ground](#).)

It's all very sobering, and we spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to right this ship—not by regulating what happens inside the four walls of the schools, but by making sure they must meet standards for performance—or close. All of the bad press makes it very hard to win support for the *good* charter schools, in terms of greater funding, facilities aid, or help in replicating.

Talk to people on the ground in Milwaukee, and they will tell you similar nightmare stories about their longstanding voucher program. There are private schools in church basements receiving taxpayer-funded subsidies where there seems to be virtually no learning going on, regardless of how you measure it.

Bad schools happen. They happen in the public sector, the charter sector, and, yes, the private sector. And since education is a "public good" as well as a "private good"—because kids' lives literally hang in the balance and so does the future of the society whose taxpayers are underwriting these costs—we can't just look the other way.

Yes, we have to work hard to get the policy design right. (In our toolkit, we applaud Louisiana and Indiana policymakers for doing a darn good job on this front with their statewide voucher programs.) Maybe the tests that voucher students take need not be the state tests so long as they're solid measures of achievement. Perhaps we need to let schools point to [alternative measures of student outcomes](#) before they are kicked out of choice programs. Possibly we need an accountability regime that's completely separate from that which governs the public schools. Such compromises might help to ensure that the educational diversity of the private school marketplace isn't inadvertently diminished.

But the answer cannot be "let the market figure it out." Because it hasn't, and it won't—and somebody must.