



U-M Prof Hints Scholars Down On School Choice, But Twice As Many Optimistic

Painting false pictures with raw stats

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A University of Michigan professor is being accused of mischaracterizing the results of a 2011 survey of scholars' views on allowing students a choice in education through private school vouchers or charter schools.

Susan Dynarski, a professor of public policy, education and economics at Michigan, wrote an op-ed for The New York Times. The headline: "Free Market for Education? Economists Generally Don't Buy It."

She wrote: "But economists are far less optimistic about what an unfettered market can achieve in education. Only a third of economists on the Chicago panel agreed that students would be better off if they all had access to vouchers to use at any private (or public) school of their choice."

Dynarski was referring to a question posed by the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago to a panel of academic economists. Of those who responded, 36 percent agreed or strongly agreed that all parents being able to choose their child's school would lead to a higher quality education.

But Dynarski failed to note that only 19 percent of those who offered a response disagreed or strongly disagreed with that assertion. Another 37 percent were uncertain.

Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, challenged Dynarski on Twitter about the accuracy of the headline.

Bedrick did his own critique of Dynarski's claims on his Cato blog.

Bedrick cited Scott Alexander of the Slate Star Codex blog who wrote: "A more accurate way to summarize this graph is 'About twice as many economists believe a voucher system would improve education as believe that it wouldn't.' "

Dynarski responded to Michigan Capitol Confidential in an email. "I report the raw stat, which is 36 percent, or roughly a third," Dynarski said.

Dynarski also sent a link to her Twitter response to someone who also questioned the accuracy of the headline. She tweeted: "Can equally say that of those with an opinion, most either disagree (19%) or are uncertain (37%)=>56%. No consensus."

Bedrick also questioned why Dynarski cited the 2011 survey when there was a more recent survey in 2012 that showed much stronger support for school choice among the academic economists polled. In the 2012 survey, 44 percent of those surveyed were in favor of more school choice, 34 percent were uncertain and just 5 percent disagreed.