



Bad Reporting About Education Is Harming Schools And Students

By Jeff Bryant

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Be afraid, be very afraid, any time you see a reporter in the business media turn his or her attention to education and public schools. What will likely follow is a string of truisms used to prop up a specious argument, steeped in biased notions that were themselves picked up from ill-informed conversations promoted by other clueless business news outlets.

All of this chatter would be something best to ignore were it not for the fact that reporters and pundits from these outlets are often raised to prominence, labeled as "experts," and lionized by political leaders and policy makers, while real authorities on education are overlooked or completely drowned out in the babble.

Exhibit A in the case against bad reporting on education is in the Feb. 14, 2015 issue of the Economist. An article titled "Pro Choice" highlights efforts to create new school voucher programs in many states and allow parents to take money meant for public education and use those tax payer dollars to enroll their children in schools of their choice, including private schools and charter schools.

This topic has been the subject of countless research studies and is a matter of ongoing examination by numerous authorities. Yet the writer barely skims the research and consults with a bare minimum of real experts on education policy.

Had the Economist made the effort to consult some real research and talk to bona fide experts, what they would have learned is there are some very big problems posed by school vouchers, and there are much better alternatives to improving schools.

It's important to call out this article and others like it, not only because it's an example of feckless journalism, but also because it exemplifies an all too common pattern when low-information reporters tackle stories about education.

When Education 'Experts' Aren't

At liberal-leaning watchdog group Media Matters for America, Hilary Tone closely follows how journalists in major media outlets report on education. She unearths some startling revelations. One such discovery revealed that whenever cable news outlets such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC feature programming devoted to education, those segments hardly ever feature real educators.

Over all cable news channels, only 9 percent of guests in education segments were educators. This would be like CNBC reporting on the stock market and hardly ever consulting with experts on finance and investing or the CEOs of publically traded companies.

Print and online news outlets aren't much better. Tone recently came across a study that found "education experts" often cited in print and online news stories "may have little expertise in education policy." The study found that the "experts" who are cited the most often are neither career educators nor scholars who've published and achieved advanced degrees; rather, they tend to be individuals from influential right-wing think tanks, with little to no scholarly work or graduate-level degree work in education.

Tone links to a write up of the study in ScienceDaily that explains the researchers found so-called education experts associated with the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank based in Washington, DC, "were nearly 2.5 times more likely to be cited" than were career educators and education scholars. In the online world, experts affiliated with AEI and the libertarian group Cato Institute were, respectively, 1.5 to 1.78 times more likely to be mentioned in blogs.

The authors conclude their findings are "cause for concern because some prominent interest groups are promoting reform agendas and striving to influence policymakers and public opinion using individuals who have substantial media relations skills but little or no expertise in education research."

In some sense, then, the Economist is following a pattern of reporting – one that tends to spread misinformation and promote shallow opinion on very important issues.

In its examination of the long-standing school voucher program in Milwaukee – now being pushed out to the rest of Wisconsin by Gov. Scott Walker – the Economist reports that results have been "mixed," though they impart "lessons for elsewhere." One of those lessons, apparently, is that a school system aided by "choice" and "competition" ensures good outcomes. "Good schools, however constituted, have good teachers, inspiring principals and respond to their surroundings," the article states. "Some of these things are easier to achieve in private schools."

The writer does not substantiate this conclusion with any links to research studies, citations from any research literature, or interviews with acknowledged research experts.

Yet had the Economist done its homework, it likely would have come to a very different conclusion.

Warnings Out of Milwaukee

In fact, there is substantial research evidence that while voucher programs like the one operating in Milwaukee may help a few students and their families, generally, they damage the well-being of students overall.

For years, Julie Mead, a University of Wisconsin education professor and expert on K-12 policy, has warned that school vouchers "undermine public schools." Mead contends that statewide plans for vouchers in Wisconsin will put more than \$210 million in tax dollars meant for public education into the pockets of private and charter schools – schools that "would not face the same scrutiny as traditional public schools."

Mead's fears are reflected in a recent report by author, journalist, and education scholar Barbara Miner. In an op-ed in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Sentinel-Journal, Miner explains,

"For those who worry about taxation without representation, vouchers should send shivers down your spine... Voucher schools do not have to abide by basic accountability measures such as releasing their test scores to the public or providing data on teacher pay. They also can ignore basic democratic safeguards such as open meetings and records laws or due process rights for expelled students."

Further, a research study conducted by Duke University economics professor Helen Ladd examined the results of voucher and parent choice programs. Ladd found vouchers tend to create a "hierarchy of schools" where students with the lowest ability, from families with the lowest income (two factors that are always strongly correlated) end up in schools at the lowest level of the performance hierarchy.

Schools that are outliers – those private and charter schools that excel at educating the most disadvantaged children – tend to reach their vaunted status because of how they control the characteristics of students they serve, either by cherry-picking better performing students or having high student attrition rates. As a result, their year-to-year performance looks good, as struggling learners are winnowed out.

More recently, education professor Julian Vasquez Heilig scanned research on vouchers and found, "The effect of vouchers on student academic achievement offers no compelling evidence to justify initiating or expanding the use of school vouchers." Heilig cites one study that concludes, "The best research to date finds relatively small achievement gains for students offered education vouchers, most of which are not statistically different from zero."

Heilig also notes that a review of research studies conducted by trade publication Education Week revealed that "much of the existing research purporting voucher success was sponsored or funded by organizations that support vouchers."

And outside the US, is the story any different (after all, the Economist has a global perspective)? In fact, a recent study of the effects of school vouchers in Chile paints an even more harmful picture of vouchers than what we see here.

Chile, the report explains, "has one of the oldest large-scale, universal school voucher programs in the world, providing vouchers to all families and students in the country to choose to study at either public-municipal schools ... or private-voucher schools."

The study's authors, Heilig and Jaime Portales, conclude that any discernable benefits gained by vouchers are not universally distributed. "Some families and students will use and benefit from the system, while others will remain marginalized," they write. What more choice and competition have resulted in, in Chile, is an increasingly stratified school system where families who are the "haves" in society gain some benefit from increased mobility, while families who remain in the "have not" status are mired deeper into schools that continue to lose funding and better-performing students to voucher receiving schools.

So for all the "good schools" the Economist believes are produced by vouchers, there remain lots of "bad ones" left in the wake. Vouchers, essentially, are no more than a glorified sorting system -- one that continues to expand inequities and further harm the schools that serve the highest-need children.

From Business-Minded to 'Business Narrow-Minded'

Of course, there may be some benefit to applying a business perspective to analyses of operational effectiveness in schools, and making a sound account of how taxpayer money is being spent; systems improvement is always an admirable goal. What's surprising, however, is how often the media fails to take into account how the economics of education actually work.

Here's an example of the damage this does: In the article in question, the Economist contends that "voucher schemes get similar results to the public schools but with much less money." Setting aside, for now, the fact that is a conclusion very much in contention, wouldn't a truly clear-eyed and tough minded view of this issue at least make some attempt to account for the costs of leaving so many students abandoned to the most dysfunctional schools, as vouchers have a tendency to do?

Furthermore, anyone with even the most basic grasp of manufacturing or marketing understands that assigning a specific cost to a single item in a systems process operating at a mass scale does not in fact reflect the true cost of the item. So assigning a specific cost to educating a child, as vouchers do, does not truly reflect what it costs to educate each child. Some students will always cost more to educate than others. And picking off students one by one from a school – as vouchers do – robs the school of the ability to scale up services to the wide variety of students it seeks to educate.

In a state or district with a voucher program, when a school loses a percentage of students in a particular grade level or across grade levels to vouchers, the school can't simply cut its grade-level teaching staff proportionally. That would leave the remaining students underserved. So what happens instead is the school cuts a support service – a reading specialist, a special education teacher, a librarian, an art or music teacher – to offset the loss of funding. This damages the effectiveness of the school long term and causes it to slide further into the ranks of "low performing."

That a business news outlet fails to grasp this fundamental concept about how schools run is alarming. It reflects the reality that what often passes for a "business-minded" look at education is really a business narrow-minded view, focused only on promoting the crudest measures of public education, rather than striving for deeper understanding.

Grand Echo Chamber of Garbage

Were this just an isolated occurrence, it would be easy to blow off the Economist's failings and move onto other topics.

But the business narrow-mindedness displayed in this particular article is echoed in the outlet's other education related articles – including this one, touting Teach for America as a way to get more "high-flyers" into classroom teaching, when research shows that TFA teachers don't perform any better than other teachers when measured by their students' test scores, and often cost more than traditionally prepared teachers do.

You see this same business narrow-mindedness echoed in other outlets, too -- as in the editorial board of the Washington Post's inability to grasp that testing mandates have done little to improve education.

You see it reflected in the views of Beltway think tanks, like the influential Thomas B. Fordham Institute, whose executive director recently claimed it's fine for charter schools to skim and retain the best students and leave the rest as so much chaff on the floor in the public school system.

You see it regurgitated by Fox News commentators who seriously assert, "There really shouldn't be public schools."

And you see it reinforced by education policy makers at the very top who ignore research and insist on a very narrow vision for what education in this country should be.

Over and over, we are delivered delirious pronouncements about "innovations" like vouchers and "choice," rather than keen insights from experts who can explain the strong evidence base for real improvements -- like class size reduction, early childhood education, and rich learning environments that include the arts and music and well stocked libraries.

What we're left with is a grand echo chamber of garbage, spewing out myth and misinformation that misdirects us from what would really be best for children and families.

And that really is scary.