



Michigan charter schools are not 'Westworld'

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Metaphors can be helpful things. But I'm about to go against one. Why, it's gonna be the gunfight at the O.K. Corral!

A prominent metaphor that's been in school choice debates for far too long is that any choice program not larded with regulations is the "wild west." I've heard it for years, but it was crack economist John Merrifield who last night spurred (a metaphor and a pun!) me to action.

Watching a television clip of economist and prominent Michigan charter schooling critic Douglas Harris, Merrifield seemed at wits' end with the labelling of the situation in the Wolverine State as if it were "Westworld." The "wild west" metaphor, Merrifield pointed out to me in an exasperated email, implies that somehow there is huge freedom for families and educators in Michigan, and that such freedom is patently dangerous.

What would a really open system — call it "a free market" — actually look like? Among many things, producers would be able to charge widely varying prices, and offer widely varying services. Educators would be able to openly make profits. Barriers to entry for new providers would be low. Meanwhile, consumers would be paying with their own money, or money they got voluntarily from others.

Far from being Eli Wallach bad, these things are actually Yule Brynner good.

Allowing providers to offer widely differing services empowers them to try new ideas. When coupled with freely-choosing customers, it also forces ideas and approaches to compete and prove themselves, spurring quality and innovation. To work really well, providers must be able to charge differing prices, because different approaches have different costs, and pricing freedom is crucial to making a profit.

Wait. Profit-making? That really is Eli Wallach evil, right?

Hardly. Producers making a profit signals that they are doing something right, something consumers value, and that other people should start producing the same thing, or maybe a bit better, so that they, too, can make money. That's how good things (Starbucks coffee, Uber, smartphones) go to scale and become cheaper, enabling lots and lots of regular folks to access them.

The flip side of this is consumers paying with their own money. Using your own dollars incentivizes critical thinking about whether what you are about pay for is really worth the cost.

Publicly-funded school choice programs, including charter schooling in Michigan, don't come close to meeting most of these criteria.

First, consumers of Michigan charter schooling get it for "free" (after taxes, of course). And what do charters get paid? It's not up to them: "A charter school receives funding through the per-pupil base foundation. By law, this amount may not exceed the per-pupil base foundation received by the local school district where the charter school is geographically located."

Funding is only the beginning. Teachers must be "certified" and "highly qualified," as defined by federal law. Charters must follow the state's "core content standards," and can be shut down when their scores on state test are too low. As public schools, it's illegal for them to be religious. And to start one, you have to get permission and oversight from a government entity such as a school district or public college.

But charter schools can make that icky "profit," right?

The schools themselves cannot. What they can do is contract with for-profit education management companies to help them operate: a circuitous, cramped route to profit-making.

For all the knocks on Michigan chartering, research has indicated that Michigan charters, specifically charters in Detroit, significantly outperform traditional public schools. What's more, charters managed for profit beat those that aren't. In Detroit, a greater percentage of charters appear to outperform traditional public schools on math and reading tests than do charters in New Orleans, where Douglas Harris works.

It's time bury the pejorative "wild west" metaphor for choice programs that are only "wild" relative to other, even more hamstrung regimes. That's not wild, and that's too bad.

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