



ICYMI: NEPC's Top Newsletters of 2023



2023 was a banner year for school choice, particularly in the form of voucher policies that funnel public school funding to private schools. Given this reality, it is not surprising that four of NEPC's five most widely viewed newsletters addressed this topic. Especially popular were NEPC's ongoing series of scholar-reviews of choice-related think tank reports.

Published on Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout the school year (and less frequently during school holidays), NEPC's newsletter aims to keep education stakeholders informed with equity-infused and research-based perspectives on contemporary challenges and events. These newsletters contain brief, standalone thought pieces related to the Center's work as well as announcements and summaries of the organization's publications and events.

In reverse order of popularity (as measured by the share of newsletter subscribers who viewed each newsletter), here are the five installments that attracted the most attention in 2023:

4 & 5. Two newsletters were tied in popularity: ***Evidence That Vouchers Are Cannibalizing Public School Budgets*** (a stand-alone newsletter) and ***Illogical Assumptions and Lack of Evidence Render School Choice Analysis Useless*** (the announcement of an NEPC review publication).

The first newsletter identified above shared and described a research report that found that the share of gross domestic product devoted to education declined between 2008 and 2019 in the seven states with the longest-running private school voucher programs, even

as private school voucher spending more than doubled and public school enrollment rose. Co-authored by NEPC Fellow Samuel E. Abrams and Steven J. Koutsavlis, both of Teachers College, Columbia University, the report that was the basis of the newsletter was jointly published by the Public Funds Public Schools, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Education Law Center.

The second newsletter identified above announced and described a review authored by NEPC Fellows Christopher Lubienski of Indiana University and T. Jameson Brewer of the University of North Georgia. The underlying report was jointly published by EdChoice and the Manhattan Institute, and it suggested that students would attend better schools, homeowners would move to cheaper housing or see their property values rise, and teacher pensions would improve—if only we were to eliminate geographic boundaries that zone students to schools. Lubienski and Brewer point out that the report offers the optimistic conclusions without mustering reliable evidence. They also describe the report as “illogical” because its conclusions and recommendations ignore or gloss over ongoing realities and challenges, such as the reality that transportation to distant schools is inaccessible to many students—especially those from low-income families.

3. Oversold Report Attributes Denver’s Strong Gains to Portfolio Reforms

The third most popular newsletter of 2023 is another NEPC review of a report about school choice. Conducted by NEPC Fellow Robert Shand of American University, this peer review focused on a University of Colorado Denver study that attributed improvements in test scores and graduation rates in the Denver Public Schools to the adoption of a “portfolio” model in which the district oversaw and encouraged the development of multiple choice-based options. Although Shand confirms that Denver did indeed experience impressive gains during the 11-year study period, he suggests that changes in demographics, funding, leadership, curriculum, and teacher policies that occurred during that same time frame make it impossible to attribute the advances to the portfolio approach. Further, he points to evidence that achievement gaps may have widened during those 11 years, and that some of the district’s gains predated the portfolio reforms.

2. Report Warning About the Teaching of “Critical Social Justice” Wanders Far Beyond Its Evidence

This newsletter focuses on an NEPC review of another Manhattan Institute report, this one about a survey in which young adults aged 18-20 were asked about eight concepts related to what the report’s authors call “critical social justice” theory. Reviewers and NEPC Fellows Christine Sleeter of California State University Monterey Bay and David Garcia of Arizona State University found, however, that the survey results failed to support multiple conclusions and recommendations included in the report. For example, the report contended that respondents learned about these concepts primarily from teachers rather than other sources; it propounded the idea that teachers indoctrinated respondents by presenting the concepts as truths; and it concluded that these concepts shaped respondents’ views of policy and politics—and none of these causal inferences were merited by the underlying survey.

1. *CREDO Report Makes Overstated Claims of Charter School Gains*

The most widely viewed NEPC newsletter of 2023 is a review of one of the most widely disseminated studies of the year. Published by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), which is affiliated with the Hoover Institution, the study—which is the latest in a longstanding line of similar studies—found that charter school students’ year-to-year test score growth exceeded the growth observed among “virtual” students in non-charters over four years, in 31 states. Reviewer Joseph J. Ferrare of the University of Washington Bothell found that the report exaggerated the size of the differences between charter and non-charter students. In fact, the differences were so small that prior reports by the same think tank labeled them “meaningless” when the CREDO researchers found charter schools to be on the losing end of those differences. Ferrare emphasized limitations and problems in the CREDO research approach and noted that CREDO’s charter school studies have repeatedly made the same errors over a period of years—errors that have been pointed out multiple times in reviews by NEPC and other organizations. Ferrare regretfully notes that, although CREDO researchers have access to a rich data set, they employ approaches that renders their research much less helpful to policymakers or practitioners.

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NEPC Resources on School Choice

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