

NEPC REVIEW: THE CASE FOR EDUCATIONAL PLURALISM IN THE U.S. (MANHATTAN INSTITUTE, JULY 2019)



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October 2019

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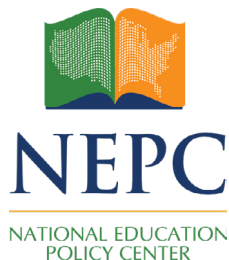
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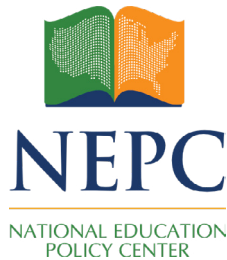
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Executive Summary

A recent report from the Manhattan Institute argues that public funding for education in the United States should be divided between traditional district public schools, charter schools, and private schools, with funding decisions based on student enrollment. *The Case for Educational Pluralism in the U.S.* asserts that expanding public funding to private (secular and religious) schools will result in greater choice for all students, improve the quality of education, reduce the achievement gap, and strengthen democratic institutions by increasing civic engagement. The report's central argument stems from a combination of (a) conceptual perspectives rather than empirical research; (b) empirical studies drawn primarily from religious and school choice advocacy groups; and (c) well-designed and peer-reviewed studies that lead to conclusions only loosely tied or entirely unrelated to public funding of private schools. Drawing on comparisons between the U.S. and countries such as Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, and Sweden, where private religious and secular schools can receive public funding, the report overlooks the notably different economic, social, political, and regulatory contexts. In the end, the report may prove useful for those who seek a rhetorical appeal for public funding of private school education. But because of lack of evidence, flawed logic, and failure to consider differences in national policy contexts, this Manhattan Institute report offers little useful to policymakers intent on improving access to quality schools.



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I. Introduction

At a time of fierce debate over the pros and cons of charter schools, voucher programs, and school privatization, a new report from the Manhattan Institute argues that the United States should expand the idea of what constitutes a “public” school to include private, independent, religious and non-denominational schools. *The Case for Educational Pluralism in the U.S.*, authored by Dr. Ashley Rogers Berner, an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University, contends that the U.S. is out of step with many other democratic countries that use public funds to pay for non-governmental schools.¹ The result for the U.S., the report reasons, is a lack of educational innovation, diminished school choice, and a bigger academic achievement gap. Using examples from other countries such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, the report makes a number of claims about the benefits and feasibility of using public funds to pay for both established and newly formed private schools based on student enrollment. The report draws on a number of empirical studies, primarily from religious and school choice advocacy groups for evidence of tangential claims, but the central argument stems primarily from conceptual perspectives rather than empirical research.

The report also details obstacles to pursuing a legislative agenda that would loosen restrictions on public funding for private religious and secular schools. In particular, it considers concerns about the effects on civic unity if parents choose schools for their children based on their philosophical or religious orientation and concerns about racial segregation. The author seeks to allay such concerns about diminished social cohesion (as a result of grouping students through choice mechanisms in schools filled primarily with like-minded peers) by citing studies showing that schools with strong and homogenous cultures can have positive effects on civic and political engagement. Similarly, the report entertains concerns about racial segregation as a result of school choice policies but largely dismisses these concerns by noting that, although research evidence demonstrates that segregation may result in lower

academic outcomes for minority youth, “it does not therefore follow that black and brown students won’t succeed unless they are around white students” (p. 8).

The report concludes with an assessment of the political potential for public funding of privately run schools. Drawing on examples of local and statewide elections in which school choice advocates wielded considerable political strength, it highlights the potential for political support.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The main assertion of the report is that public money should be available to fund not only public district schools but also privately managed schools including charter and independent private schools. The argument rests primarily on the author’s compilation of examples of other countries where such arrangements exist, but the report also cites findings from tangentially related issues (academic achievement improves with the use of high-quality curriculum and textbooks, for example). The report compares the public education system in the U.S. to those of other democratic countries around the world and finds that while, in many countries, government funding is provided to a variety of private and public schools, in the U.S. those options are limited to a few relatively experimental charter school and voucher-like programs. The U.S., the report asserts, should allow public funds to be paid to any private or charter school that is deemed of acceptable quality (as determined by either standardized test scores or a school inspection body), does not promote sedition, and does not discriminate on the basis of race.

This central argument rests on the following five claims:

1. Since other countries with high-performing education systems such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands have systems in place for religious and other privately operated schools to receive public funds based on student enrollment, educational outcomes in the U.S. will improve if U.S. states pursue similar policies, allowing both religious and private secular schools to compete with traditional district public schools for students and public funding;
2. The public education system in the United States is currently a “unitary” system that is philosophically and pedagogically homogenous;
3. Transfer of public funds to charter-authorized and private schools (presumably both for-profit and not-for-profit) will result in greater philosophical and pedagogical diversity in educational approaches;
4. By allowing a greater number of charter schools and private schools access to public funding, parents and children who cannot currently afford a private school will find the “right” schools more accessible;
5. Schools privately run but publicly funded will increase academic achievement (and reduce the achievement gap) through more robust curricula and will boost civic engagement by providing stronger and more internally homogenous school cultures.

The first claim is based on studies from the Cato Institute² and the American Enterprise Institute.³ These studies conclude that many countries that outperform the U.S. on international comparisons of academic achievement such as the PISA exams also allow private schools to receive public funds. None of the cited research provides any evidence of a causal relationship between these findings or considers other varying social, economic, political, or regulatory contexts between the countries. These studies also fail to consider nations that allow public funding of private schools but have lower scores than the U.S.

The report provides no research evidence for the second, third, or fourth claim.

Claim (5) is based on two well-established areas of research identifying effective policy levers for raising student achievement. The first includes numerous high-quality studies that demonstrate positive impacts on academic achievement from more engaging curriculum and better quality textbooks. For example, a 2015 report from the widely respected University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) provides robust evidence that links certain forms of teaching and learning to improvements in test score gains and attendance trends.⁴ Another example, from the Brookings Institution, demonstrates that “curriculum effects are large compared to most popular policy levers.”⁵ None of the evidence cited, however, provides any link whatsoever between publicly funded private school or charter school education and higher quality curriculum or textbooks.

The second area of research that informs claim (5) includes comparisons of school cultures in religious and secular schools and their relative impact on students’ civic engagement. For example, the report cites Campbell’s 2008 study that compared civic outcomes of students in private schools with those of their public school peers. Campbell found that private school students “are more likely to engage in community service, develop civic skills in school, express confidence in being able to use those skills, exhibit greater political knowledge, and express a greater degree of political tolerance.”⁶

A two-page section of the report is dedicated to suggesting ways to navigate the cultural and political obstacles proponents face in pursuing a shift of public revenue from public district schools to private educational institutions. These obstacles include the following: the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, public commitments to “district” education (schools run by public education systems governed by elected officials and school boards), and concerns that fragmenting students by belief systems could lead to a breaking apart of social cohesion.

The report concludes by suggesting that these obstacles, far from being insurmountable, can be overcome via the political process. It gives examples of states such as Illinois and California where legislators have instituted a variety of pathways for the transfer of public funding from traditional “district” public schools to privately operated charter schools.

III. The Report’s Rationale for the Findings and Conclusions

The overall rationale for the report’s assertions is that there are other countries that use public funds to pay for private school education. Adopting those policies in the U.S., the

report reasons, will diversify public education and thereby improve educational choices and outcomes for lower income students. Yet at the heart of the report lies a troubling irony: It uses terms such as ‘diversify,’ ‘pluralism,’ and ‘mosaic’ to provide a rationale for the public funding of private schools—many of which include restrictions based on religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, and philosophical and ideological beliefs—in short, schools that lack diversity and pluralism within their walls.

The report provides neither research-based nor anecdotal evidence that any of the many public education systems found in the U.S. are, in fact, philosophically or pedagogically homogenous (“unitary” in the language of the report). The report gives examples of the diversity found in a variety of publicly funded private schools in other countries, for example Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and secular schools. The claim that diversity of choices for low-income families will result from the transfer of public funds to private school options, however, is not substantiated.

Similarly, the report concludes that greater educational choice derived from the transfer of public funds to independently managed private and charter schools will improve educational practice, reduce the achievement gap, and promote more robust civic engagement. These conclusions are based on a selective use of research findings or on value claims that lack supporting evidence.⁷

IV. The Use of the Research Literature

The report draws on a mix of conceptual and empirical research, primarily from non-peer-reviewed magazines, blogs, bulletins, journals, and faith-based think tanks such as Cardus, a Canadian faith-based think tank, Notre Dame University’s Cardus Religious Schools Initiative, other school choice advocacy as well as free-market, libertarian organizations.⁸ Based primarily on the (non-peer-reviewed) advocacy work of these organizations, the report argues that by redirecting public money to private and charter schools, the U.S. will diversify approaches to teaching and learning, increase low-income students’ school choices, decrease the educational achievement gap, and boost civic engagement. When broadly accepted peer-reviewed research literature is cited, the report draws a series of “bait-and-switch” conclusions from the evidence that do not represent rigorous, analytical or even plausible analysis.

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

This report is more advocacy brief than research paper. The claims made in the report can be divided into: those for which *no evidence* is provided; those for which the *evidence is selective*—based on research exclusively from pro-privatization and school choice advocacy organizations; those based on *robust data unrelated to the claims*; and *claims made out of context*.

Claims Without Evidence

In some areas, the report makes claims without supporting evidence from either scholarly research or advocacy reports—for example, the claim that the public education system in the United States is currently a “unitary” system that is philosophically and pedagogically homogenous. There are large bodies of work that contradict the assertions about curricular homogeneity made in this report including scholarly journal articles, books, professional magazines, blog posts, and reports that describes enormous variation in the pedagogy, philosophy, and curricular approaches of the nearly 40,000 public schools. To argue that public education in the U.S. “has operated as a unitary system for over a century” without providing any evidence to support this claim strains credulity.

Moreover, the report ignores significant evidence that many charter management organizations (CMOs) and privately managed schools run by educational management organizations (EMOs) are run as monolithic enterprises with dozens or hundreds of schools in lockstep with one another in their approach to teaching and learning.⁹ As the 2017 report *Spending Blind* found,

While some charter schools have proved exemplary, much of the industry has become dominated by the same types of organizations legislators had sought to reform: large chains of schools where materials, methods, and evaluation are centrally dictated and teachers lack the power to set the curriculum; Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) that replicate a single model over and over again with little variation; and schools whose quality of education is no better than that of nearby public schools, and who do not serve to spur improvements in the wider system.¹⁰

The report cites no research evidence that supports the claim that charter and private schools will result in greater educational innovation.

Claims Based on Selective Evidence

Standard research practice dictates that when a report synthesizes findings from previous studies, there should be transparency concerning the selection criteria for the studies cited. This report, however, provides no such criteria. The author draws on a number of advocacy group papers to make the case that public funding should be available to private religious and secular schools. These groups are largely Christian and libertarian think tanks, their reports are rarely empirical, and their research is not peer reviewed.¹¹ Many of these groups stand to benefit, financially, from the redirecting of public funds to private schools (in particular religious schools).

Claims Based on Robust Evidence Unrelated to the Report’s Central Arguments

There are two exceptions to the claims based exclusively on advocacy research. The first is the report’s use of a half dozen scholarly studies from peer-reviewed academic journals and nonpartisan institutes that show the impact of high-quality curriculum and textbooks on

improved academic outcomes.¹² Oddly, however, the author draws no connection between the findings and the report's overarching claim that opening public coffers to privately run schools will improve academic outcomes. No evidence is provided (nor is there any in the studies cited) to show that publicly funded private schools have higher quality curricula or textbooks, only that higher quality curricula and textbooks are associated with improved learning—a fact already true for current funding models for public education.

The second exception is the report's use of one robust, peer-reviewed study that employs rigorous empirical methodology to compare the school cultures of public and private schools. Private schools, Notre Dame professor David Campbell found, have stronger school cultures that are better at fostering civic identity and engagement than public schools.¹³ Campbell's research does, in fact, show that private (in particular religious) schools have a strong sense of community and culture that may lead to civic commitments such as volunteering. Unfortunately, the author of this report is selective in the conclusions drawn, ignoring clear reporting of mitigating variables other than whether the school is public or private to explain the differences. In *The Civic Side of School Choice: An Empirical Analysis of Civic Education in the Public and Private Schools*, Campbell, as the report indicates, found higher levels of community service and civic skills among the private school students. But Campbell also attributes much of this effect to measures of voluntarism that are mandated in most Catholic schools but in only some public schools.¹⁴ In other words, the volunteering activities rather than a stronger school culture built around religious beliefs may account for the different outcomes. The state of Maryland, among others, mandates voluntary community service hours in all public high schools. Moreover, a 2009 study by Jeffrey Dill found that the effects of Catholic schools on civic attitudes disappear over time. Dill also concludes that private school advantage is "mediated through family school environment variables...specifically parent-school involvement, intergenerational closure, student-teacher relationships, the importance of participation among peers and volunteering during the school years" and that these variables "seem to account for the private school effect on adult civic participation."¹⁵

More concerning, this report ignores further findings by Campbell that look beyond voluntarism as a measure of civic identity. When it comes to political tolerance, for example, Campbell finds that although students in private secular and Catholic schools appear to have higher levels of tolerance than students in public schools, "religious/non-Catholic school students' tolerance levels are lower."

In addition, there is a wide body of literature not cited by the author that acknowledges findings about strong communities in some religious schools, but that conclude that the same kinds of socially and academically beneficial cultures can be nurtured in public schools. They do not conclude, as does the author, that funding should be redirected from district public schools to private and charter schools.¹⁶

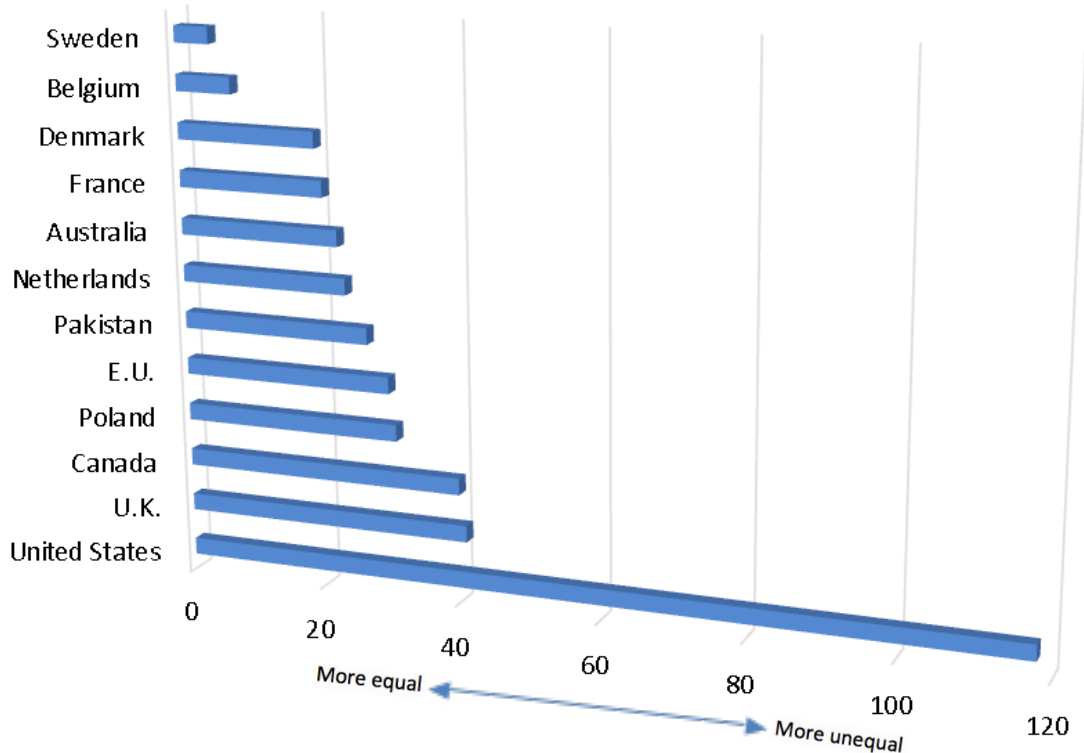
Claims Made Without Context

The most vexing omission in the report is the absence of any context for its international comparisons. The author cites nearly a dozen countries that spend public money on a variety of educational choice schools including private and religious schools in order to suggest that the U.S. should follow suit. But almost every country held up as an example of what

the author would like to see happen in the U.S. has lower economic inequality, universal health insurance, a stronger social safety net, stronger unions, and bigger public sectors than the U.S.—contextual factors that make school choice more equitable than it would be in the U.S. Moreover, private schools in these countries must comply with a wide range of government-imposed rules and regulations that do not exist in the U.S.¹⁷ Even the most cursory consideration of educational success, in particular among minority and poor students, would consider these factors. Yet this report ignores them entirely. Parents in all the countries the report uses as examples of why the U.S. should use public funds to support private school education) have relatively equitable (in comparison with the U.S.) access to public services and support.

The report fails to consider the effects of economic inequality on the likely outcomes of private school choice initiatives. Consider a comparison of inequality levels across the report’s comparator countries. The Gini index measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of family income (a lower Gini index signals a more equal distribution of family income across the population while a higher index represents greater inequality). Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Australia, Canada, and the U.K. each enjoy a Gini index between 25 and 32.¹⁸ Pakistan and Poland each have a Gini index of 31 and India’s Gini index is 35. The U.S., on the other hand, has a Gini index of 47, making it the fourth most unequal OECD country in the world. According to 157 countries monitored by the CIA, the rank of the U.S. in income inequality is 118. By contrast, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Australia, and Poland rank 5, 8, 20, 21, 23, 24, and 31. (See table 1).

Table 1. Rank in Income Inequality of U.S. & Comparator Countries Used in Report



Since it is well established that poverty and economic inequality are both highly correlated with poor academic outcomes, the choice to ignore relative inequality across the comparator countries used in the report is a serious oversight.

Many of the comparator countries also have far greater mechanisms for publicly funded childcare than the U.S. While this report seeks to tie differences in educational outcomes between the U.S. and many European countries to inadequate public funding for private school education, those comparator countries that do fund religious and other private schools also fund social programs that ensure some of the lowest levels of inequality (economic, political, social, and education) in the world. Denmark, for example:

spends much more than the U.S. on all levels of education. In particular, a much higher share of its poor young children is enrolled in daycare and preschool than the United States. This large public investment in kids seems to increase cognitive skills among poor Danish children compared to their American peers. In international math and reading scores, for example, the poorest quartile in Denmark far outperforms their counterparts in the U.S.¹⁹

Moreover, Americans—in particular poor Americans who the author argues would benefit from private school choice—are also the least likely to have the time to investigate options to be able to make informed choices or even to know those choices exist. Belgians, Australians, Swedes, and French workers work shorter weeks than Americans. The Dutch can claim the world's shortest workweek at 29 hours.²⁰ Annually, parents in most of these countries work an average of 210 fewer hours than their American counterparts.

The report also opposes the very public sector initiatives that may have allowed school choice to work in all of the comparator countries including: higher minimum wages, collective bargaining protections, public sector jobs, universal healthcare, retirement security, and public housing. Every comparator country used in the report offers free health care to its citizens except India. Indonesia, which implemented universal social health insurance coverage in 2014, expects the rate of health coverage to reach 100% by the end of 2019. Almost every comparator country ensures paid parental leave. There is little reason to believe the outcomes of private school choice policies in the U.S. would match those in the report's comparator countries.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's findings depend on the assumption that using public funds for private-school education will result in the kinds of school choices enjoyed by (mostly Northern) European families across the socioeconomic spectrum. This assumption is contradicted by significant evidence that, in the U.S. context, diversion of public funds to charter and private school options leads to lower quality options for schooling for the most vulnerable Americans. Expanding U.S. charter school options and allowing private schools to receive public funds has often led to increases rather than decreases in the achievement gap and in more impoverished schools for underserved students. As Gordon Lafer found in an exhaustive report of

California charter schools,

While charter schools are required by law to accept any student who applies, in reality they exercise recruitment, admission, and expulsion policies that often screen out the students who would be the neediest and most expensive to serve—who then turn to district schools. As a result, traditional public schools end up with the highest-need students but without the resources to serve them.²¹

In the 2016-17 school year, Lafer's research shows, charter schools led to a net fiscal shortfall of \$57.3 million for the Oakland Unified School District, \$65.9 million for the San Diego Unified School District, and \$19.3 million for Santa Clara County's East Side Union High School District. The cost to the remaining district public schools that now serve a poorer student body includes larger class sizes, fewer counselors and teachers' aides, and the elimination of arts and physical education programs.²²

In sum, the validity of the reports' arguments are either unsupported or based on selective evidence.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The Manhattan Institute's *The Case for Educational Pluralism in the U.S.* comes at a critical time. Efforts to divert public funding from district public schools to both non-profit and for-profit charter and private schools are on the rise.²³ The Supreme Court, in a precedent-setting decision that could affect public funding of religious private schools, ruled that governments may not exclude a religious organization from consideration for "a public benefit for which it is otherwise qualified, solely because it is...religious."²⁴ In June 2019, in *Espinoza v. Montana*, the Supreme Court also agreed to decide the constitutionality of state prohibitions on allowing state tax credits to be used to pay for religious schools; the Court is currently hearing arguments in that case.²⁵ Efforts to allow public funding of religious and other private schools are likely to follow. Unfortunately, this report fails to offer evidence-based information for policymakers.

The report selectively ignores evidence that challenges the orthodoxy of private school choice advocates; it makes sweeping claims about the homogeneity of public education in the United States that are contradicted by a preponderance of evidence; and its conclusions rely on comparisons with countries that have policy contexts significantly different than those in U.S. states. As a result, the report draws unsubstantiated and misleading conclusions. The author may find a receptive audience in advocacy organizations such as the free-market and libertarian think tanks cited in her report. Outside of those groups, however, the report's lack of evidence, leaps of logic, and—most importantly—its failure to consider differences in national policy contexts reflect a poorly developed polemic rather than a useful tool for policymakers.

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