NEPC

NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Review of *Better Data, Better Decisions* and *A Crisis We Can Solve*

Reviewed By

Erin McNamara Horvat
Temple University
David Everington Baugh
Bensalem Township School District, Pennsylvania

January 2015

Summary of Review

The two reports reviewed here advocate for school choice as a mechanism for improving educational outcomes. The ConnCAN report bases its claims on largely anecdotal evidence, making many unsubstantiated claims. It is merely a choice advocacy document and is therefore of little value to serious policy reform conversations or academic researchers. The report from the American Enterprise Institute is more interesting. It is grounded in solid scholarship and data from existing choice research as well as research conducted by its author. It makes useful suggestions regarding how choice might be more effectively implemented. However, like the ConnCAN report, it too ultimately makes unsubstantiated claims about the power of choice to reform schools and to improve educational outcomes. The AEI report provides a useful overview and analysis of the choice literature and is valuable for those seeking a deeper understanding of school choice, although it overreaches in its claims regarding the power of choice and of the market to reform schools and produce better educational outcomes.

Kevin Welner
Project Director

William Mathis
Managing Director

Don Weitzman
Academic Editor

Erik Gunn
Managing Editor

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: (802) 383-0058

Email: NEPC@colorado.edu
http://nepc.colorado.edu

Publishing Director: Alex Molnar

GREAT LAKES CENTER
FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH & PRACTICE

This is one of a series of Think Twice think tank reviews made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. It is also available at http://greatlakescenter.org.

Review of *Better Data, Better Decisions* and *A Crisis We Can Solve*

Erin McNamara Horvat, Temple University
David Everington Baugh, Bensalem Township School District, Pennsylvania

I. Introduction

Federal and State policy have increasingly relied on school choice as a lever for educational reform. Both the No Child Left Behind legislation and the subsequent Race to the Top initiative have incorporated choice as a fundamental element aimed at improving educational outcomes. Never before have more American families had so many educational choices, yet the assumption that school choice, primarily through the creation of high-quality charter schools, would lead to the demise of substandard schools has proven erroneous. Not only have "bad" schools proven hard to eliminate, but "high-quality" charter schools have yet to proliferate in numbers adequate to meet the demand for more high-quality educational seats, particularly in our urban centers. The two think tank reports considered here approach school choice from different perspectives. The American Enterprise Institute[1] (AEI) report, *Better Data, Better Decisions: Informing School Choosers to Improve Education Markets*, argues that better data would lead to better decision-making around school choice for parents, presumably strengthening good schools and allowing families to steer clear of low-quality schools. The ConnCAN[2] brief, *A Crisis We Can Solve: Connecticut's Failing Schools and Their Impact*, provides strong advocacy for school choice as a reform strategy, yet provides little evidence.

The ConnCAN report makes a strong case that there is a desperate need to improve school quality in Connecticut's neediest neighborhoods and promotes charter schools as the best and perhaps only mechanism for increasing the number of high-quality educational seats in Connecticut. It focuses exclusively on the potential of charter schools to provide a higher-quality educational experience than offered by traditional public schools and put lower-performing traditional public schools out of business in the process.

The AEI report provides a thoughtful reflection on, and assessment of, school choice decision-making. It reviews a number of different efforts to engage stakeholders in the school choice process. Ultimately, while the report does offer concrete suggestions aimed at improving the quality of school choice decision-making, it does not successfully argue that increasing choice will increase school quality overall. The report does recognize that

many school-choice decisions are made based on informal networks and criteria that researchers have had difficulty identifying and evaluating.

II. Findings and Conclusion of the Reports

A Crisis We Can Solve: Connecticut's Failing Schools and Their Impact

This six-page policy brief is published by ConnCAN, an advocacy organization "leading a movement to improve public education for kids" by increasing access to great schools. It makes a passionate argument about the need for more high-quality seats in Connecticut schools, especially in high-poverty urban areas. The report asserts that "nearly 40,000 children in Connecticut remain stuck in chronically failing schools" (p. 2).

The report documents the cost to society of continuing to under-educate this segment of the state's population and blames "outdated state policies" for limiting the ability to create new options and meet students' needs. The report claims that there are some schools in the state that do meet the needs of all students (impoverished and otherwise) when they are given the "tools they need to succeed" (p.1). The report closes by suggesting that improvement will come with "bold and proactive solutions," including "increasing education options" and "better educator compensation."

Better Data, Better Decisions: Informing School Choosers to Improve Educational Markets

This 16-page report published by AEI asserts that choice is seen as a mechanism, and at times a panacea, for better educational quality. Given the intense interest in choice as a reform strategy, the report promises to provide an "empirical look at how governments and other third-party organizations can help inform families about their school choice options" (p. i). The report considers how to better inform choosers. Recognizing that no choice is ever perfectly informed, the report provides background on choice theory, focusing on the notion of "bounded rationality." What this means is "decision making happens in contexts in which people lack relevant information about their options, have finite time to commit to collecting that information and are limited in their abilities to process and use what information they have" (p.2). The author argues that school choice is not an entirely "rational" decision but is shaped by 1) the context within which the choice is made, 2) the background of the chooser, and 3) the available information.

The report provides an overview of what families want from schools, where they get information on schools, and how they use information to make decisions. This section of the report relies on research conducted by the author. He notes that most information on what families want from their children's schools is based on survey data which, while useful in some respects, does not take into account desirability bias: the tendency of respondents to respond in ways they think they are "supposed to." The report suggests that

other factors (such as accessibility and information from social networks) are actually more influential in real-life decision-making. It further argues that preferences and desires are malleable: they can change over time and in light of available information.

The report asserts that research on school choice has described two main sources of information: social and formal. Parents talk to other parents and make decisions based on these conversations. Some parents also consider other sources of information, including school districts, governmental entities, and non-governmental third parties. Two critical points the report makes about families' ability to gather information are: 1) the quality of information available through social networks is heavily influenced by social class, with more well-to-do families typically having access to better information, and 2) the way information is presented (timing, format, amount, source) influences the capacity of the student or parent to use the information effectively. The report notes that finding ways to cut through "data smog" to determine what information is reliable, good, and relevant is a primary challenge. Lastly, the report addresses the challenge posed by the fact that, especially for middle and high school students, there are multiple decision makers (parents and students) who come to the process with different informational needs and desires. The report addresses the challenge of helping parents and students make good decisions that prioritize academic quality.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations presented in the language of bounded rationality; that is, the author advocates solutions that take into account the imperfect human reality of decision-making and that improve the odds that parents and students will make "good" decisions by providing them with good information in a timely fashion in an accessible format. The report encourages families to actually make a choice—to consider the myriad options available to them rather than "choosing" those most readily accessible (convenient) to them or passively accepting the schools selected by others in their social network. Those interested in improving student and parental decision-making are encouraged to be accurate in their information, to provide it in an accessible format, and to accommodate the imperfect reality of real people making hard choices that balance many factors beyond a school's academic quality.

III. The Reports' Rationales for their Findings and Conclusions

A Crisis We Can Solve

The ConnCAN report concludes by asserting that bold change is required to improve Connecticut's lowest-performing schools and make all schools in the state "great." The authors suggest that increasing education options, improving educator compensation, and that supporting student social and emotional well-being will contribute to improved outcomes. To support these claims, the report provides only anecdotal evidence focused on the schools it labels "ConnCAN Success Stories." While details are provided on the "pockets of excellence," where minority and low-income students are posting results

higher than Connecticut's average achievement, these "data" were not systematically collected or analyzed and thus provide little real evaluative evidence to support the report's claims. The need for systemic change in the five low-performing districts identified in the report is somewhat questionable based on the evidence provided in the report.

While the AEI report does offer concrete suggestions aimed at improving the quality of school choice decision-making, it does not successfully argue that increasing choice will increase school quality overall

The ConnCAN report presents an often-repeated argument for school choice: increasing choice will provide more high-quality educational options for families and will contribute to the elimination of low-performing schools. However, the report does not provide convincing evidence that charters on the whole provide higher-quality environments or that increasing the number of charters will contribute to the demise of low-performing traditional public schools. In fact, the crux of the ConnCAN report seems to rest on the claim that the fact that 4,000 families are on waiting lists for charters is proof that those charters will improve outcomes.

Better Data, Better Decisions

This report's rationale is that improving families' capacity to make "informed choices" about schools will increase their capacity to make "good decisions." In theory, this will lead to school choice "markets" functioning more effectively to provide better education and better serve society. While the report makes well-supported claims about the challenges to improving families' capability to make wise choices, the claim that improving their information base will automatically improve educational markets is unsupported. No evidence is presented to support the assertion that choice improves school quality, yet this claim is explicitly made by the report.

IV. The Reports' Use of Research Literature

A Crisis We Can Solve

This short advocacy brief is aimed at persuading the reader that choice is an effective lever for improving Connecticut's schools. It makes claims based on anecdotal evidence while making little use of the academic research literature. Rather, it relies on ConnCAN reports, state data, and policy briefs from other advocacy organizations.

Better Data, Better Decisions

A particular strength of the report is its discussion of bounded rationality and its impact on school choice. The report relies on academic literature from peer-reviewed journals

such as *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* and the *Peabody Journal of Education*, books from academic presses and policy reports from well-regarded policy organizations such as Pew. As a policy report, the document has fewer citations than typical academic articles. However, the author makes good use of the literature and presents both the scholarship informing the report and his own research in accessible prose.

V. Review of the Reports' Methods

A Crisis We Can Solve

The ConnCAN report is a policy advocacy brief and as such does not employ a clear methodology. Using numerous examples, it reviews ConnCAN school data and selected state data, and it references other choice advocacy publications. Its methods can be viewed as largely anecdotal and should not be relied upon as methodologically sound research.

Better Data, Better Decisions

AEI's *Better Data* report is grounded in both the extant literature on school choice and the author's own research. Beginning with a useful introduction to the concept of "bounded rationality," the report goes on to review recent research on choice generally and school choice specifically. The report relies on the literature from psychology, economics, and education to provide the reader with an understanding of work on choice and decision-making generally as well as on school choice in particular. While this review is not comprehensive, it is adequate for a report of this nature. The author presents findings from two studies he conducted: an Online Experiments Study and a Field Experiments Study. The methods and findings for both studies are presented in separate text boxes in the report, while conclusions drawn from the research are embedded in the report. This decoupling of the methodological details from the larger report works well for a policy report of this nature, but it does not provide the kind of detail required for peer-reviewed academic research. Unfortunately, the bibliography simply notes that these studies are "forthcoming," and no link to the studies is provided. Thus, reviewing and evaluating these studies is not possible.

The Online Experiments Study used an online survey of 1,000 adults to understand how individuals use numerical ratings of components of school quality and parent comments. The matching of the sample to the American Community Survey and the regression design used appear to be appropriate, although statistical methodological details are not presented. The author notes that he used profiles of local schools already known to the respondents in order to simulate an authentic choice setting, yet his results do not take into account the impact that prior knowledge could have had on the ways in which parents used the different types of ratings. This is an area worthy of further research.

The Field Experiments Study is presented as a unified three-part study conducted in Milwaukee, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia. While it may make sense to present the research in this way, the methods for the Milwaukee and DC studies were quite different from those used in Philadelphia. While the research at all three sites explored how the "provision of information"—the way that information is presented—matters to how it is used, the methods of the three differed significantly. Data in Milwaukee and DC were collected from families recruited for the study after they had reviewed an informational booklet, while in Philadelphia participants were recruited from those attending a High School Fair. Thus, the samples are fundamentally different: the Philadelphia families could be seen as already engaging with the choice process by virtue of their attendance at the Fair. As with the Online Experiments Study, the methods appear to be appropriate and to support the conclusions drawn; however, the details of the methods are thinner than is typical for rigorous peer-review evaluation.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The ConnCAN report makes a number of unsupported recommendations and conclusions based on a singular lack of research-based evidence.

The AEI report, on the other hand, provides a thoughtful and articulate analysis of the challenges facing those who have the opportunity to select a school and the challenges facing those attempting to guide those school choosers. It is reasonable in its conclusion that governmental organizations, by helping school-choosers make a more informed decision about schooling, may help their students get into better schools. Regrettably, there is no discussion of the notion of school fit—the idea that certain schools are a better fit for certain students. There is a clear recognition that this is not a definitive piece on the topic of school choice and that more work is needed in two areas: 1) improving the measuring of and reporting on school performance, and 2) showing how this information is used by parents, students, and others; this needs to be better understood by policymakers. While the report provides useful scholarship on school choice and how to improve parents' capacity to make good choices, it falls short in providing evidence to support the claim that improved choice will improve educational outcomes.

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

Too many students in America's schools are not performing at acceptable levels. While there are myriad reasons for this, including children's life experiences prior to entering school and the conditions of their lives outside of school, part of the blame for this under-performance is often leveled at schools themselves. While poverty and inequitable early childhood conditions are likely the most critical drivers of this underperformance, policymakers and pundits who believe the "market" can improve outcomes have decided

that choice is the most effective lever to increase the availability of high-quality schools while eliminating poor-quality schools.

Both of these reports ignore the fact that charter schools perform about the same as traditional public schools.[3] Rather than engaging in a substantive conversation about how to raise the quality of struggling schools by such methods as providing out-of-school supports for children and families, increasing the number of highly qualified, competent teachers in these schools, or equitably funding schools, free-market advocates are content to rely on choice within a mythical school marketplace to effect change. Due to this inability to recognize the ineffectiveness of the marketplace, and the rose-colored glasses through which they view the "success" of charter schools, the policy recommendations suggested here are not likely to lead to meaningful change in school quality overall.

Market proponents will find a lot to like in these reports. Unfortunately neither of them addresses the root causes of our inability to provide a high-quality, 21st Century, democratic educational experience to all our students. The ConnCAN report offers more opinion than fact and makes many unsubstantiated claims. In contrast, the AEI report provides useful information founded on research that will improve the capacity for families to make better decisions about their children's schooling. Whether or not these better decisions will lead to the kind of overall improvement our system requires in order to compete in the global economy, and whether it allows us to fulfill the promise of democratic schooling for all, are unanswered questions.

Notes and References

1 Valant, John (2014). *Better Data, Better Decisions: Informing School Choosers to Improve Education Markets*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved December 18 2014, from http://www.aei.org/publication/better-data-better-decisions-informing-school-choosers-improve-education-markets/.

2 ConnCAN (2014). *A Crisis We Can Solve: Connecticut's Failing Schools and Their Impact*. New Haven, CT: Author. Retrieved December 18, 2014, from https://www.scribd.com/doc/247050431/ConnCAN-Brief-A-Crisis-We-Can-Solve.

3 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2013, June). *National Charter School Study*. Palo Alto: CREDO, Stanford University. Retrieved December 18, 2014 from http://credo.stanford.edu/research-reports.html.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED:	**Better Data, Better Decisions: Informing School Choosers to Improve Education Markets** and **A Crisis We Can Solve: Connecticut's Failing Schools and Their Impact**
AUTHORS:	(**Better Data**) John Valant; (**Crisis**) None listed
PUBLISHERS/THINK TANKS:	(**Better Data**) American Enterprise Institute; (**Crisis**) ConnCAN
DOCUMENT RELEASE DATES:	November 2014
REVIEW DATE:	January 5, 2015
REVIEWERS:	Erin McNamara Horvat, Temple University; David Everington Baugh, Bensalem Township School District, Pennsylvania
E-MAIL ADDRESS:	horvat@temple.edu
PHONE NUMBER:	(215) 519-2190

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Horvat, E. M. & Baugh, D. E. (2014). *Review of "Better Data, Better Decisions: Informing School Choosers to Improve Education Markets" and "A Crisis We Can Solve: Connecticut's Failing Schools and Their Impact."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-charter-aei-conncan.