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THE SCHOOL CHOICE HOAX: FIXING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

RONALD G. CORWIN & E. JOSEPH SCHNEIDER
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Reviewed by D. M. Keller

The School Choice Hoax: Fixing America's Schools makes the argument that America's voucher system and charter schools promise more than can be delivered, not only deceiving parents but depriving the nation's school system of funds that could be more effectively used. The authors believe that choice in education should not lead parents to "abandon regular public schools to exercise their choices" but instead provide parents "better schools and better choices within the public education system" (Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p. 13).

The authors of the book, Corwin and Schneider, have significant experience in the education field. Corwin, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at The Ohio State University, has taught in addition to being a past director of basic research at the Department of Education. Schneider is the managing partner of an educational consulting company and serves as the executive secretary of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.

The book is divided into six chapters, the first dealing with a review of school choice, then a discussion on what the authors claim are the exaggerated claims made by proponents of charter schools and vouchers. The authors then offer ways to improve charter schools, and why "choice schools" should be specialized and operated by local school districts. The last chapter before the book's conclusion deals with the challenges facing poor and minority students. This reviewer found the book to be well organized and researched, including many references at the end of each chapter.

The authors begin their arguments by narrowing their discussion of school choice to school vouchers and charter schools, leaving aside any evaluation of home-schooling, work-study programs, or parochial schools. The authors then make several good points about the problems of charter schools. Many of these problems have been well-documented in newspaper articles. And although the authors do concede that there are some successful charter schools, as measured by academic performance, that admission seems half-hearted: "In Los Angeles, there is an exemplary charter school, headed by an award-winning administrator backed by dedicated teachers, which has sometimes demonstrated student gains in basic subjects" (Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p. 21).

In fact, a recent *U.S. News and World Report* story would also seem to provoke questions about the authors' assertions: a charter school in Tucson was recently ranked by that publication as third in the nation for all high schools, the first time any school in Arizona even made the list. Clearly not all charter schools are great schools, and many are not even good schools, but it could be argued, contrary to the authors' position, that the model is still being formed. Judging from the results of some charter schools and the successful experience this reviewer believes Catholic schools offer, charter schools, and all non-public schools, would seem to have more promise than the authors allow.

As the authors correctly point out, many of the charter school customers are those students and parents who have been somehow disenfranchised by the public school system. They seek a choice because they do not believe in the public schools they have experienced, and will seek alternatives. Although much could be done to improve the licensing of these schools, the authors seem to miss an important point. The market, by virtue of the fact that parents have a choice, will determine which of these schools will see enrollment gains and continue to succeed at the expense of those not improving. In this reviewer's opinion, and according to some of the research that the authors dismiss, choice is the key to improving both the non-public and public school systems.

The authors do make some compelling arguments about reforms that could occur within public school districts, citing examples like Boston's "Pilot Schools." Those schools operate like charter schools, only with the important distinction that they are under the auspices of their local school district, in this case the Boston Public School District, with unionized teachers. The authors claim the Pilot Schools show student performance gains from small-size classes and a degree of self-selection yet, according to the authors, offer a clear advantage over charter schools. Chief among these advantages seems to include the possibility that positive methods employed by the Pilot

Schools can percolate through the Boston Public School District to benefit an even larger constituency. Although the transmission of techniques and innovation from the Pilot Schools throughout the Boston Public School District is a laudable goal, this reviewer questions whether bureaucratic filters really allow such dissemination. The authors describe other models which offer feasible reforms that could improve public school districts, presenting details on their operations and comparing them to charter schools. This reviewer found the discussion informative, but still wondered why the authors could not concede that other non-public school models could co-exist.

The authors also examine specialized schools, which they define as a “school with a particular focus and demonstrated competency operating within a planned network of schools” (Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p. 141). Although most charters could fit this description, absent for the requirement to be operating within the planned network, the authors are quick to point out that a specialized school should establish a mission that “describes how it fits in with other schools in the network” (p. 141), thereby minimizing competition with other schools in the network, differentiating the specialized school from the charters. Magnet schools are offered as examples of specialized schools. The authors follow this discussion with an examination of the social inequities of our country, and how those inequities impact public schools. This reviewer found no disagreement with the observations made in this discussion about the inherent inequities of resources available to public schools in rich versus poor areas.

Despite all the assertions and claims made by the authors, this reviewer could never fully accept all they presented because of a fundamental problem with their basic premise: no real successful non-public school model exists, or at least a model superior to public schools. This claim, central to their argument, is that since no other superior model exists, the public school model should be made the singular focal point of the education system in our country, and no funds should be diverted from that system. The authors, in making this claim, specifically cite, and then judge erroneous, the oft-quoted private education superiority attributed to Catholic schools by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982). The authors state the data used to support Coleman’s assertion of Catholic school superiority were refuted “when re-analysis of this body of work demonstrated that the small reported differences were primarily attributable to student backgrounds and in any case were trivial” (Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p. 23). It seems the authors completely ignored any reference to larger studies completed by Greeley (1989), which not only proved the superiority of Catholic schools in general, but also the ability of these Catholic schools to outperform their public school counterparts in urban areas, especially for minority and lower socio-economic

groups. Other studies also back Greeley's findings, including *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, by Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993), as well as more recent studies (Jeynes, 2004). Despite the authors' assertions, the most recent statistical evidence, as presented in Jeynes, clearly states that not only is there a Catholic school advantage, there is also consistency in the methodology proving that advantage over the last 30 years.

Another point of denial for the authors was a lack of discussion on the DC Choice Incentive Act of 2002. The program, which was implemented in 2004, was designed to improve the educational choices of some of the nation's poorest families by providing up to \$7,500 to students opting out of the District's public school system, judged by some to be one of the worst in the country. The funds are allocated to students by means of a lottery, giving preferential treatment to poor, minority families. Many of the Catholic schools operating in the District serve lottery students who are predominately non-Catholic, poor, and from minority groups, the exact kind of students the authors maintained are ignored by the choice advocates and left to flounder in inner-city schools where only the less talented teachers work. However, in these Catholic schools the lottery students not only have a chance to thrive and have access to some excellent teachers, they perform better than their public school counterparts. The book would have offered better coverage of its subject by including a discussion of this initiative as a means to provide another non-public school model to address the problem.

The School Choice Hoax suffers from the flaw of not including a more serious and honest discussion of Catholic schools as models of alternatives to public schools. While the authors seem on target with some of their suggestions on how to improve the public school systems, this reviewer would disagree with their exclusion of charter, private, and especially Catholic schools as resources in meeting the challenges of best educating our children. In the end, the authors suffer from the same stain of misinformation they cast on proponents of charter schools.

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