

Competitive Kids

June Kronholz (“Competition Makes a Comeback,” *features*, Summer 2010) writes that the self-esteem movement in the 1990s made many educators squeamish about competition. In fact, American educators have had a love/hate relationship with it over the past century. For example, in the 1930s and the 1960s there were conscious moves away from competition in schools.

What we have seen is that as schools move away from promoting competition, those parents who think schools are not providing enough competitive outlets go outside of the traditional education system. Often these parents tend to be middle class or upper middle class, and they create or join extracurricular organizations that charge participation fees. This development has led to increased inequality, as children who cannot pay to play are excluded.

Not only is there growing inequality associated with afterschool competition, but increasingly younger and younger students are diving into competitive tournaments on sports fields, in dance and music studios, and in other venues, such as academic bees. Kronholz focused on middle schoolers (which is also a shift—it used to be only high school students who engaged in competitive tournaments), but elementary school-age children also now participate in a variety of highly competitive and organized afterschool activities. Formal competition, tryouts, and practices are part of the everyday grind, as ever-increasing numbers of American children are being raised to play to win both inside and outside of the classroom.

We do not know the long-term consequences of being engaged in competition from an early age, either psychologically or in terms of educational outcomes (e.g., Do competitive kids attend “better” colleges and universities or pursue more advanced degrees?). Education scholars should consider



how to incorporate these types of extracurricular activities into existing theories, frameworks, and models.

HILARY LEVEY

*Robert Wood Johnson Scholar in
Health Policy
Harvard University*

NCLB and Achievement

Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob tackle with sophistication the pivotal question of whether No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has sparked gains in student achievement since its enactment in 2002 (“Evaluating NCLB,” *research*, Summer 2010). We have known that math scores among 4th and 8th graders continued to grow under NCLB, a trend that began a quarter century ago. Reading scores have largely failed to budge nationwide since the late 1990s, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Achievement gaps have widened slightly in recent years.

Dee and Jacob convincingly show that certain subgroups of children attending schools in states with weak accountability regimes prior to NCLB partially caught up with children in states with stronger programs. This

good news applies to students of color, primarily Latino kids, but only for progress in mathematics. Effects were larger for girls in the 8th grade than for boys, and few benefits were observed for reading (not surprising, since reading scores have hit a flat, dusty plateau nationally).

By focusing on states that displayed weak state-led accountability, Dee and Jacob give us a highly innovative analysis. But it remains slippery to infer that NCLB per se has driven this catch-up in weak accountability states. Well over a century ago, states with lagging enrollment rates displayed accelerating attendance after passage of compulsory attendance laws. But was it the legal intervention that drove local behavior, or the pervasive spread of expectations and more-demanding norms, seeping out to states that lagged behind (in this case, urban states where demand for young workers had long suppressed school enrollment)?

There’s now little doubt that NCLB advanced more-demanding expectations for state officials and local educators, creating stiffer expectations for, and material policies enforcing, tighter accountability among the laggard states. But was it the federal policy bundle or specific policy elements that moved these new norms out into the accountability hinterlands?

Bill Clinton likes to say, “If you find a turtle on the fencepost, he probably didn’t get there by himself.” The Dee-Jacob findings offer good news, confirming with sound analysis that a federal presence in the accountability push has reinforced state efforts. Going forward, though, how a more robust federal partnership might yield the next generation of benefits, especially to raise students’ capacity to read and reason, is the pressing question.

BRUCE FULLER

*Professor of Education
and Public Policy
University of California, Berkeley*

Measuring Public Benefit

Rick Hess's discussion of for-profit and nonprofit funding models ("Fueling the Engine," *features*, Summer 2010) raises more interesting questions than it answers. There is indeed a fascination about finding points of overlap between business and philanthropic investment strategies, but in most fields this remains more of an aspiration than a reality.

From the start, attempts to turn philanthropy into social investing and to apply principles of venture capital to grantmaking have run into a single enormous obstacle: the absence of performance metrics that would allow one to determine anything remotely close to "social return on investment." Nonprofit entrepreneurs across the sector would dearly love to be able to show that charitable gifts are actually producing valuable public benefits. The tools and techniques to nail down claims of "returns" remain blunt, however, and nowhere near as sharp as performance metrics in the business world, where profit and loss are revealed on a bottom line. In many fields of activity, legions of imprecise and incommensurable performance standards do not inspire confidence about claims of comparative performance advantages of one organization over another.

The foundations and donors supporting the education reform movement do have one enormous advantage over their philanthropic counterparts in the arts, health, the environment, human services, and any number of other fields, namely, the presence of measures of student achievement that allow real comparisons of school performance.

Hess is correct that there is an impulse to be more rigorous in the school reform movement. For this to happen, real student-achievement data must drive funding decisions and be at the center of fateful choices

about which school models are to be scaled and which are not. The funders in the charter space are doing this tough work. They are in some ways the vanguard of the so-called venture philanthropy movement, mainly because they actually have quality and commensurable data to work with. So many other funders working in areas from housing to immigration to

The foundations and donors supporting the education reform movement do have one enormous advantage, namely, the presence of measures of student achievement.

historical preservation do not have the kind of data that could drive decisionmaking.

In the end, Hess is right to draw our attention to growing parallels between business and philanthropic investments. He just needs to be more grateful for how lucky the school reform movement is to have quality, meaningful performance data to drive funding decisions.

PETER FRUMKIN
*Professor of Public Affairs
University of Texas at Austin*

Charter School Segregation

In "A Closer Look at Charter Schools and Segregation" (*check the facts*, Summer 2010), Gary Ritter and several colleagues offer a reanalysis of our February 2010 charter-school report. On the *Education Next* blog, we responded to the team's claims. Below we recount our primary argument.

The major empirical distinction between our analysis and the Ritter team's reanalysis is that we aggregated school-level charter enrollment data to the national, state, and metropolitan-area levels. The use of metropolitan areas stemmed from a deliberate methodological decision. As the U.S. Department of Education has noted, "charter schools often draw students from outside their home district's attendance boundaries."

The Ritter team reanalysis instead compared the racial enrollment of charter schools to that of central-city schools, describing it as "the best available unit of comparison," and argued that the geographic concentration of charter schools in urban areas merits a comparison of schools located only within urban districts.

We disagree. The urban concentration of charter schools is irrelevant if charter schools are drawing students from across boundary lines. In many of the metropolitan areas containing at least 20 charter schools, minority segregation was higher in charter schools than in the metro's regular public schools.

We did, in fact, examine the segregation of students in charter and traditional public schools by geography—comparing students in these school sectors within cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Significantly, we found that the geographical skew of charter schools mitigates very little of the differences in minority segregation. Fifty-two percent of city charter-school students were in 90 to 100 percent minority schools, compared to 34 percent of traditional public-school students.

Our study does not stand in isolation from the growing research consensus concerning segregation in charter schools. Further, it is extremely important to emphasize that our report focused on a number of other civil rights dimensions in charter schools, none of which have been addressed in this critique. We urge the government to improve data about charter schools and to monitor the civil rights of all students who attend or wish to attend charters, in addition to further examining the effects charter schools have on surrounding public schools.

ERICA FRANKENBERG
GENEVIEVE SIEGEL-HAWLEY
GARY ORFIELD
The Civil Rights Project, UCLA

**Ritter, Jensen, Kisida,
and McGee respond:**

While Metropolitan areas (CBSAs) are very large, most charters are concentrated in very small areas within them. In Washington, D.C., 93 percent of the charter schools in the 5,000-square-mile metro area are located in inner-city D.C. Since the evidence shows that most charter students do not travel more than 10 miles to attend school, it is not likely that students are crossing state and city boundaries to attend inner-city schools.

While the CRP authors do present a city-based analysis, it is off-base because it includes small cities with fewer than 100,000 people; these are not places in which charters predominately locate. Finally, the authors overlook a fundamental fact: because charter students *choose* these schools, their civil rights are enhanced rather than limited.

Most of America's 5,000 public charter schools are located in cities, many in tough neighborhoods

with failed public schools. Consequently, charters proudly enroll higher percentages of black and Hispanic children than other public schools, and a growing body of research underscores their success.

Yet the Civil Rights Project (CRP) sees only a geographic concentration "that skews the charter school enrollment toward having higher percentages of poor and minority students." This misses the point. By putting low-income students of color on the path to college, charters are attacking the real civil rights problem of our day: negligent schooling that shatters the life prospects of our most vulnerable students.

The CRP makes inappropriate comparisons of inner-city charter-school demographics with those of entire metropolitan areas, as if the charters were evenly distributed among Chicago, Joliet, and Naperville, in one example. The University of Arkansas research team dismantles this fallacy with solid data, realistic analysis, and plain common sense.

What remains puzzling is why the CRP seems so driven to go after charter schools, even to the point of contorting evidence.

Their report repeatedly refers to federal data showing only 7 English Language Learners (ELL) enrolled in California charter schools. We agree that this illustrates a troubling gap in federal record keeping, but a quick check of the California Department of Education web site would show that, in fact, more than 47,000 ELL students were enrolled during the 2008–09 school year, about 18 percent of the state's charter-school population.

And again: "Between 20 and 25 percent of charter schools show no evidence of offering the National School Lunch Program, thus calling into question whether they are enrolling low-income students." True, some charters don't participate, not because they bar low-income students but

because the program can be burdensome. It requires that lunches come from a USDA-approved "School Food Authority" that can dictate menus and meal-delivery times that may be at odds with the schools' tastes and timetables.

The pursuit of equal educational opportunity is a serious matter, and good people can differ on the right strategies. It's distressing that the Civil Rights Project is so wedded to formulas and methods that predate charter schools by decades and that they are expending such effort to discredit a movement that is bringing new hope to students who need it most.

NELSON SMITH
*Senior Advisor
National Alliance for
Public Charter Schools*

Finance Lawsuits

In their article "School-Finance Reform in Red and Blue" (*research*, Summer 2010), Christopher Berry and Charles Wysong not surprisingly find that partisan politics affect how much a state spends on K–12 education and how such money is allocated. However, my own experience suggests that it is more politics as usual, rather than the particular terms or even fact of a court judgment, that leads to the outcomes found by the authors. I am therefore concerned that the article may overstate the effects of school-finance judgments (SFJs).

There are several reasons for my concerns. First, some of the court decisions on which they rely are not decisions holding the state's school-financing system unconstitutional, but are preliminary decisions in cases not actually decided on their merits until years later. For example, the 1995 decision in New York's *Campaign for Fiscal Equality* case cited by the authors simply permitted the adequacy case to proceed to trial. It was not until early 2001 that the state's school-finance



School-Finance Reform in Red and Blue

The constitutionality of state school-finance systems has been under attack for nearly 40 years. Since the California Supreme Court's 1971 ruling in *Serrano v. Priest*, finance-reform advocates have filed 139 separate lawsuits in 45 states. The specific language varies from state to state, but virtually all state constitutions contain education clauses that require the state legislature to provide an "adequate," "basic," or "thorough and efficient" education for all children. Plaintiffs have relied on these provisions to seek increases in the financial resources devoted to public schools, especially those serving disadvantaged students. Courts have in turn deemed school-finance systems unconstitutional in 28 states.

While school-finance lawsuits have attracted significant attention in the legal community and generated numerous state-specific case studies, nationwide analyses of the effects of school-finance judgments (SFJs) have been relatively few. This small pool of studies has produced some common conclusions, namely, that such judgments reduce funding inequality between districts by increasing spending in the poorer districts and that they do so by transferring responsibility for education funding from local to state government. Some questions remain unanswered, however, such as why SFJs have substantially different effects in different states.

Where the money goes depends on who's running the state

A court's ruling that an existing school-finance system is unconstitutional is only the first step toward funding reform. Some court orders provide instruction for how the legislature should fix the system, but most simply instruct state politicians to redesign the finance system themselves. In either case, the new finance system must garner the approval of the state legislature and governor. In other words, after the court ruling, the reform must pass through the state's usual lawmaking process. States with similar court rulings may end up

By CHRISTOPHER BERRY and CHARLES WYSONG

LITERATURE / JAN. 2010

www.educationnext.org

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 1 / EDUCATION NEXT 63

system was first declared unconstitutional. Similarly, in South Carolina, it was in 2005, not 1999, that the courts declared the state's system of school finance unconstitutional.

The impact of relying on these preliminary decisions could be significant. In New York, for example, some of the largest increases in education aid in the state's history took place between 1995 and 2001, well before the first court decision declaring the system unconstitutional. It is also interesting to note that the huge increases in New York in 2006 were enacted despite a decision by the state's highest court several months earlier that a significantly lower appropriation was needed to meet constitutional requirements, indicating that something other than the court decision was behind the unprecedented increases.

Second, as the authors themselves point out, the small number (three) of Republican states with an SFJ gives one pause. Wyoming runs counter to their findings, with dramatic increases in school spending due mainly to budget surpluses and an ability to tax mineral interests in the state without significant political retribution. The decisions in the other two Republican

states were also unusual. In 2003, the Ohio Supreme Court decided it had no jurisdiction to enforce its earlier 1997 ruling, removing any threat to the legislature's authority that the court order posed. In New Hampshire, the adequacy aspects of the court decrees were very limited, with the court merely ordering the legislature to define an "adequate" education.

Finally, in selecting states with SFJs, the authors apparently made no attempt to distinguish between "equity" cases, which focus on *equalizing* funding, and "adequacy" cases, which have as their goal *increased* funding. An example is Kansas, where the authors relied on an equity case (the 1991 *Mock* case) instead of the much later 2005 adequacy decision in *Montoy*, which expressly required significant appropriation increases.

ALFRED A. LINDSETH
Of Counsel
Sutherland Asbill & Brennan

Defending Edutopia

I am dismayed that *Education Next* would publish Robert Pondiscio's article on the George Lucas Education

Foundation (GLEF) and its Edutopia initiatives ("Edutopian Vision," *features*, Summer 2010). I have served for years as a member of GLEF's National Advisory Board (as a labor of love; advisory board members are unpaid) because I believe in the value of this enterprise.

Pondiscio charges that the Edutopia principles are ungrounded in research. For example, he attacks the principle of comprehensive assessment, citing a 1995 RAND report on a single statewide program. He should instead examine the extensive 2006 National Research Council report on "Systems for State Science Assessment" or the excellent assessment section in the draft "National Educational Technology Plan 2010," from the U.S. Department of Education, which describes multiple ways of making alternative assessments practical. Similarly, instead of quoting a single cognitive scientist about the deficiencies of project-based learning, Pondiscio should examine the National Research Council's 2005 volume on "How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom" or the excellent research synthesis on project-based learning in the 2006 *Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences*. The deficits in having research evidence to support one's position are Pondiscio's problem, not Edutopia's.

CHRIS DEDE
Wirth Professor in
Learning Technologies
Harvard Graduate School
of Education

L.A. Charters

Bruce Fuller's article ("Palace Revolt in Los Angeles?") *features*, Summer 2010) accurately captured Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's history with the city's unions and outlined the schism that arose when the mayor pushed for

the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to open 36 schools to operators including charters.

What Fuller did not explore is what transpired behind the scenes. That story reveals the limit to the mayor's pushback on behalf of charters and the fact that there is no limit to what United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) will do to prevent the growth of the charter movement.

UTLA quietly and feverishly worked to ensure that no or few schools were awarded to charter school operators. In addition to pumping money in, UTLA called in the help of all the local unions. The L.A. Times reported that Maria Elena Durazo, leader of the 800,000-strong L.A. County AFL-CIO, met with every LAUSD board member the day before the vote. The day of the vote, the mayor was in Washington, D.C.

The voice of the South L.A. community—a community underserved for decades by the public school system—was ignored. The overwhelming majority supported ICEF Public Schools as the operator of the new Barack Obama Global Leadership Academy, as did the superintendent and his panel of experts. Sadly, Los Angeles Unified bowed to pressure from union leadership rather than allow successful charters access to this facility and other district campuses.

In a neighborhood where more than 50 percent of students drop out of high school, ICEF Public Schools—with 15 high-achieving schools that serve students who live in the area surrounded by the four major South L.A. freeways—has graduated 100 percent of the seniors in all four graduating classes. All have been accepted to college. We have also narrowed the

achievement gap in performance on standardized tests between African American and white students to single-digit numbers.

While progressive unions throughout the country are working with charter schools, having concluded that charter schools are bettering public education, local L.A. teachers union head A. J. Duffy told the L.A. Daily News, "We're never happy when a charter school opens up."

Here at ICEF Public Schools, we won't be thwarted from achieving our ultimate goal. We will continue to fight for the students in our neighborhood and their right to a high-quality public education.

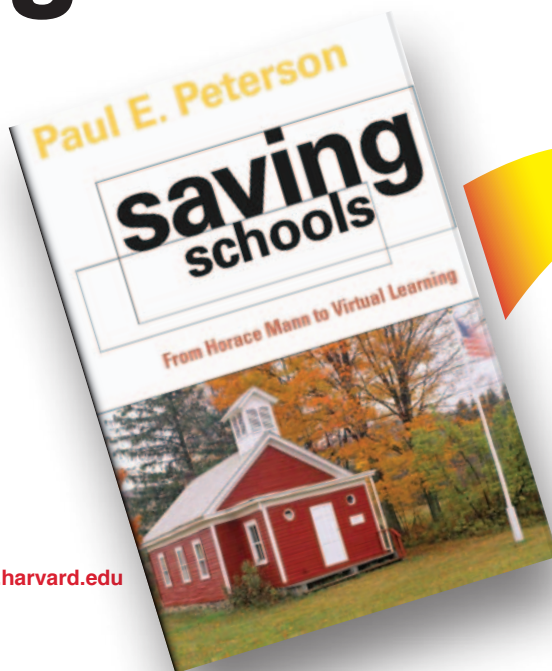
MICHAEL PISCAL
Founder and CEO
ICEF Public Schools

"This book is a masterpiece — carefully constructed and engagingly written." — Clayton Christensen, author of *Disrupting Class*

saving schools *Now available as an e-book!*



Paul E. Peterson



Order online!

Harvard University Press hup.harvard.edu
Barnes and Nobel bn.com
Amazon amazon.com
Borders borders.com

Visit www.savingschools.net for excerpts, reviews, videos, blogging and other information.