

DOCUMENT REVIEWED: "Choice and Education across the States"

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Summary of Review

Choice and Education across the States, published by the Heartland Institute, is an advocacy document that assigns letter grades to states based on the extensiveness of each state's school choice system. The report asserts, based on a faulty use of past research, that an increase in school choice will strengthen accountability and improve student achievement. It awards most states low grades, reflecting a desire for more school choice throughout the nation. But the report does not provide much in the way of useful information; it only offers the argument that states should increase school choice, dressed up with a letter grade for each state.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

*Choice and Education across the States*¹ presents a report card grading and ranking the states in terms of school choice efforts. The report contends that states should provide parents with more school choice options as a way to increase accountability and improve achievement. It examines four aspects of school choice: vouchers, charter schools, tax credits, and public school choice.

This report card was produced by the Heartland Institute, whose mission is to “promote free-market solutions” that include “parental choice in education.”² Consistent with that mission, the new report advocates an expansion of the school choice marketplace, as well as fewer constraints on all forms of school choice. Some aspects of the report itself are straightforward in that advocacy, but—as discussed below—other aspects are misleading.

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The report card gives higher grades to states that have adopted more school choice programs, particularly programs with a stronger free-market orientation. It claims that school choice has been effective, so states willing to try these programs can improve the quality of their schools.

The particular findings and conclusions of the report can be thought of as the individual state grades. But more generally the two main conclusions reached are as follows:

- **States with more types of school choice received high grades, while those that do not emphasize choice**

were ranked at the bottom. The states receiving the most points are Arizona (15 points), Florida (14 points), Wisconsin (12 points), and Ohio (11 points)—states that offer a variety of different choice programs. The eight lowest-scoring states (West Virginia, South Dakota, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Nebraska, Alabama, Washington, and Montana) each were awarded only one or two points since they only offer public school choice: magnet schools, virtual schools, or open enrollment.

- **Although a wide range of school choice policies and approaches can be found across the 50 states, the report places most states at the bottom of the grade distribution.** There are almost three times as many states at the bottom than at the top of the grade distribution. No state received a grade of an “A” on the report’s non-curved scale. That is, even Arizona is seen by the Heartland report as needing to expand its choice offerings.

III. RATIONALES SUPPORTING FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

As described below, the report clearly sets forth the criteria selected for awarding grades, but the findings and conclusions were not, in any meaningful way, “analyzed.” To support the first conclusion that the highest scores should be given to states that have a wider variety of school choice programs, the report puts forth the argument that once school choice is introduced into state policy, its popularity fosters expansion and its opponents find it more difficult to foil choice plans.

To support the second conclusion, that most states deserve low grades because they have

insufficient school choice programs, the report points to “highly entrenched special interests, both union and corporate, who profit from the status quo” (p. 11).

Accordingly, these conclusions are grounded in strongly felt rhetorical arguments, but a foe of market-based school policies might use the same criteria to reverse the grades (e.g., Washington and Montana given As, and Arizona and Florida given Fs). The values and beliefs of the Heartland author are, effectively, the complete rationale supporting these findings and conclusions.

IV. THE REPORT’S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The empirical contentions in the report mainly concern the past effects of school choice policies. But it should be noted that this report includes many unsupported assertions, offered without citations. The sources that are cited tend to be those published by school choice advocates and generally not subjected to peer review. Moreover, these discussions fail to introduce and discuss prominent contradictory research literature. The following are some examples:

- The Heartland report states that graduation rates in choice schools in Milwaukee’s voucher program were higher than in non-choice schools. But the study making this claim was published without peer review by School Choice Wisconsin, a voucher advocacy organization, and it was criticized by an earlier think tank review as a comparison of “apples and oranges.”³ That is, it compares students using vouchers to their non-choosing public school counterparts, without accounting for the differences due to selection bias and differences be-

tween the schools, such as graduation requirements and student demographics.⁴

- The report also argues that there was high parental satisfaction for school choice in Florida’s McKay Scholarship (voucher) Program. Setting aside the question of whether the popularity of voucher programs should also be measured by asking nonparticipants, the cited report has other problems. As was the case with the Milwaukee study, it also did not go through a peer-review process. Further, it used satisfaction levels as reported on a survey to measure the success of the program but did not discuss the methodological problems (e.g., selection bias) of doing so.⁵
- Perhaps most importantly, the report asserts that charter school students have been shown to be more likely than traditional public school students to be proficient in reading and math. Cherry-picked studies can indeed show positive (or negative) effects on test scores. But Miron, Evergreen, and Urschel (2008) recently analyzed evidence of the relationship between charter schools and student achievement and found that “on the whole, charters perform similarly to traditional public schools.”⁶ Their comprehensive review of charter school studies, which included the most recent high-quality studies, yielded mixed results on charter school performance, in contradiction to the overly rosy picture painted by the new Heartland report.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT’S METHODOLOGIES

The report does an admirable job explaining the criteria used in the grading system. States with more school choice options and fewer restrictions in choice programs received higher scores. Grades are based on 23

dichotomous questions, with a “yes” answer worth one point and a “no” answer worth zero points. These questions focus on the school choice initiatives of states and are categorized into four different types of school choice (vouchers, charters, tax credits, and public school choice).

One concern with this method is that public school choice is the subject of fewer questions⁷; a state’s participation in this type of choice will generate fewer points (and, relatively speaking, a lower grade). If a state implements vouchers, it can receive up to seven points, while participation in public school choice will only award it a maximum of three points. This aspect of the scoring system was not as apparent or well-explained as was the overall focus.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the report’s findings are based solely on questions asking whether states are implementing different types of school choice or restricting school choice in certain ways, and since there are only 23 questions, the report is not comprehensive. These simple yes-no questions, all worth the same value, make no attempt to determine how states are employing the different types of school choice, nor do they attempt to assess the quality or results of those choice programs. Furthermore, as the report acknowledges, “each state has different needs, socio-economic considerations, constitutional requirements, and political circumstances,” which often call for different school choice programs (p. 5).

Accordingly, a state with little demand for school choice would be awarded a better grade by the Heartland standard if it adopted poorly functioning, underfunded, ill-received choice programs that resulted in

lower student performance. While the report deserves praise for the straightforward nature of grading system, those simple criteria start to look questionable if the reader fails to accept the premise that a more unrestricted marketplace of choice will necessarily have a positive outcome.

The report acknowledges some of these limitations, but readers can still be misled when making sense of these grades, as discussed below.

VII. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

The Heartland Institute advertised its report on its website by featuring several news releases that describe the report card as one that “ranks state efforts to increase accountability and improve student achievement with four kinds of school choice: vouchers, charters, tax credits, and public school choice.”⁸ These news releases are tailored to individual states based on the grade received. For instance, the headline created for media outlets in South Dakota is “Choice and Education: South Dakota Earns an F,” and the article begins by asserting that “Parents hoping to wrest control of their children’s futures away from education bureaucrats and politicians should consider moving from South Dakota.”⁹

Such news releases help to explain why *Choice and Education across the States* is limited in its usefulness. Report cards can be arbitrary and misleading. According to a peer-reviewed study published earlier this year by Chi and Welner, these grades and rankings “have great potential to cheapen the discourse around important issues.”¹⁰ A given ranking system’s particular choice of criteria will determine the results.¹¹ Because of these inconsistencies, any given report

card is only useful if readers understand the ranking criteria and underlying beliefs of its authors. But most readers see only news releases and headlines, never understanding the underlying criteria.

The article by Chi and Welner argues that grades or rankings should “clearly state limitations and explain underlying values and assumptions.”¹² As mentioned above, the new Heartland report card does some of this; it provides straightforward scoring procedures and results, and it explains that states with more school choice and fewer restrictions received higher scores. But the Heartland news releases do not explicitly explain the ranking system and its criteria. They do not, for instance, mention that those without restrictions are given higher grades.

According to Chi and Welner, “[b]y issuing

report cards, rankings, and grades, organizations have found that they can make their primary arguments easily understood and can gain influence in policy debates.”¹³ Report cards also “allow a newspaper an obvious headline and an easy local angle.”¹⁴ Grades provide conclusions that are easy to understand and explain, especially for policy makers who want quick assessments. In this case, the Heartland Institute hopes that this report card will “provide a roadmap for state legislators seeking to improve student achievement through school choice.”¹⁵ But it is unclear what these state legislators could learn from the new Heartland report, other than that their state was just given a (low) grade. If their new understanding is merely that the school choice system in their state is less extensive than that in another state, then it would seem the report is of use only as an advocacy document.

Notes and References

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- ⁷ There are seven questions about vouchers, seven about charter schools, six about tax credits, and three about public school choice.
- ⁸ Bast, D.C. (2008, April 18). *Choice and education: Where does your state rank?* Chicago: The Heartland Institute. Retrieved April 19, 2008, from <http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=23098>
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