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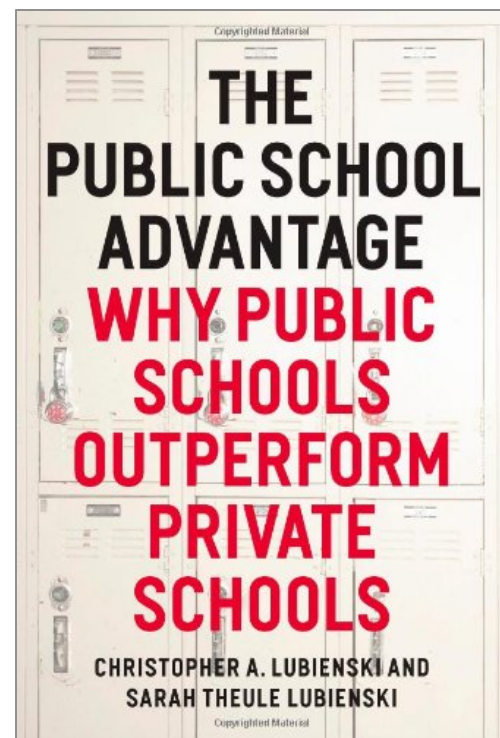
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### Introduction

Beginning as a single research project that unexpectedly exposed surprising findings about different school sectors' performance, Drs. Christopher A. Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski's book fuels debates and challenges popular assumptions about market-based schooling in the United States (and beyond). The original findings, which were just the beginning of what would become a much bigger final project nearly a decade later, can be simply stated: once correcting for demographics in a statistical model using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) school achievement data, public schools outperformed both private and charter schools. With these initial results in mind, the following essay provides a review of the authors' book and research efforts whilst encouraging policymakers and the public to engage with the literature as they develop or otherwise actively engage with educational policies. As suggested by the Lubienskis, potentially flawed market theory assumptions about schooling must be scrutinized. Their challenging analysis, backed with substantial evidence provided within the book, critically



challenges three market-based assumptions: firstly, that public schools are “failing,” secondly, that parents choose according to a simplistic, academic, competition-based “logic” and, thirdly, that autonomous, competitive organizations will produce better schools.

## Background

The book compiles two of the authors’ nationally- and empirically-based research studies alongside a critically challenging framework for one great discussion about expanding market-based school choice reforms. Their initial findings were explored in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 2005 (S. T. Lubienski & C. Lubienski, 2005), and published as papers, in different variations, with the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education (C. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2006) and the *American Educational Research Journal* (S. T. Lubienski & C. Lubienski, 2006a). The study investigated mathematics achievement patterns in schools across the country, utilizing NAEP data for analysis. For background, NAEP is a program of the U.S. Department of Education, described as, “the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in various subject areas” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Whilst Sarah Lubienski was analyzing NAEP data for a mathematics instruction analysis (2006), she added private schools as a variable and found, to the authors’ admitted surprise, that when controlling for demographics, public schools performed better on math achievement scores than both private and charter schools (p. xvii).

Their controversial findings, which held up after testing with various models and levels of scrutiny, were met with wider criticisms related to NAEP’s cross-sectional limitations (Peterson & Laudet, 2006; Wenglinsky, 2006; Wenglinsky, 2007). The Lubienskis, around the same time, had written about strengths and limitations associated with NAEP data, such as conclusions researchers *can* and *cannot* make (S. T. Lubienski & C. Lubienski, 2006b). Such criticisms, it must be said, are not surprising, considering the politically- and economically-charged school choice policies and practices that are growing across the nation, and with strong political support.

Next, the Lubienskis and Dr. Corinna Crawford Crane (2008) set out to address concerns and to more deeply investigate their original findings, this time using another nationally representative data set, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K). The information provided in this longitudinal, rich dataset advanced their original research. Indeed, the Lubienskis' findings were confirmed and strengthened. With this dataset, they were also able to analyze some potential reasons *why* public schools outperformed other school sectors.

Increasingly, policymakers have been acting upon prominent market-based assumptions that promote school choice policies. Policy decisions are often framed around the hope that school choice reforms might be the “panacea” for better schooling and outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990, as cited in C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014). So, it is not surprising that more recent, and at times quite impolite, controversy was directed toward the Lubienskis after the 2014 publication of this book (see Greene, 2014; C. Lubienski, 2014; Wolf, 2014). To me, these criticisms, which are likely to continue, add credence to the importance and perceived threat of challenges to market assumptions for schooling. Therefore, the decade-long relevancy and controversy surrounding this research highlights the importance of this book for educational policymakers and the public. The landscape of school choice reform, based on theories associated with political market economies, competition, and privatization, is expanding in the United States and beyond (p. 131). If the market theory applied to education is flawed, policymakers and the public will benefit from this knowledge.

## **Evidence and Challenges for Education Market Theorists**

### **Competition as a Universal Remedy**

The first two chapters, distinct from the more empirically-based chapters that follow, provide the framework for which readers can connect to the findings. Firstly, the authors theoretically describe schooling in a democratic society, and describe various, conflicting models of schooling. The

Lubienskis suggest that one of the main reasons for ongoing dissatisfaction with education in the United States is related to tensions associated with three models of schooling. They are: (1) public education is a place for carrying out politics and democracy (as in “democratic control of schooling” [p. 9]); (2), education is a science, wherein experts make decisions based on professionals’ best practices, and the field is organized with skilled expertise, and; (3) schooling is a “business paradigm, where schools have to compete with each other to attract consumers” (p. 13). After discussing how these tensions are exacerbated since validating one model can easily invalidate aspects of the other models (p. 17), the Lubienskis suggest that the third option, a market model, is a “tidy fix” (p. 20) to the problems associated with debates surrounding the other two models. Ownership of schooling is placed outside of the schools and government and given to consumers (seen here as parents and children). This model has, indeed, gained bipartisan support.

Chapter 2 expands on this market model guiding the current education reform movement. Background is provided for readers to understand the ways in which the model has come to attract so much support. An important understanding to take away from the first two chapters is that free markets, as well as governments, can and do fail, for example, as in extreme inequality of wages in markets and in failures to provide adequate delivery of services, such as filling potholes (p. 2). To deal with such failures, the Lubienskis describe a “knee-jerk” (p. 2) tendency to look to simplistic models, in this case markets, to address social problems (pp. 2-3). For some, this model could provide the universal remedy for education problems (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, market tensions are always observable, and they manifest in various forms of inequality. Therefore, it is important to understand how various types of schools are viewed in this competitive model and to understand whether competitive markets, in fact, produce better performance or if, as evidenced by the Lubienskis, certain school types simply serve more advantaged students.

The empirically-based chapters that follow address the difficult task of attempting to disentangle complicated factors that can all influence students’ academic achievement in schools, since it is academic

achievement that is typically used as a driving force for competition in the schooling market (p. 21). To do this, they use sophisticated statistical techniques to control for family and school factors in both nationally representative datasets.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Sector Climate: Better Schools or More Advantaged Students?**

*Yet the classic studies on public and private school effects on academic achievement are becoming quite dated... In the meantime, substantial changes have continued to reshape private schools and the populations they serve. For instance, many urban Catholic schools—enrolling higher proportions of minority (and non-Catholic) students—are closing or in some cases converting to charter school status. And even as the Catholic school share of the private school market declines in favor of newer ‘conservative Christian’ schools, homeschooling increasingly draws students from... [various] sectors. So schools are now operating in a different policy context. [The]... studies were written at a time when vouchers were essentially just an abstract idea... when charter schools were just beginning their rapid proliferation and vouchers had not yet been ruled to be constitutional. (p. 51)*

Considering this new educational policy context, Chapter 3 illuminates how private schools have been viewed as models for superior academic achievement and how they relate to public choice theory. Earlier studies, by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982), Coleman and Hoffer (1987, as cited in C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014), Chubb and Moe (1990, as cited in C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014), and Grogger and Neal (2000, as cited in C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014), provided evidence that typically supported a general consensus for a “private school effect.” The Lubienskis’ quote above, however, suggests that a new policy context, where policymakers’ assumptions related to this “private (or autonomous) school effect

are reshaping the educational landscape in the United States” (p. 51), makes a more up-to-date consideration important. After all, the authors show, some of the same private and charter practices that have been associated with greater achievement over public schools, such as autonomy, freedom from teacher certification requirements, and curricular choices, are the same practices that, as described in their results, appear to explain *why* private schools’ scores fall below those in public schools.

### **The NAEP Results**

Chapter 4 highlights findings from the authors’ cross-sectional NAEP data analysis. They begin the discussion by stating that policymakers should consider replicating the private sector organizational models for the public school sector *if* differences in test scores are primarily due to the superior effectiveness of these models but, *if this is not the case* and if, in fact, differences are due to more and/or less academically advantaged families, then current, market-based structural changes are “limited in their ability to address the roots of educational inequality and ineffectiveness in schooling” (p. 61). To test this hypothesis, the Lubienskis closely investigated patterns of achievement across sectors, using a multilevel analysis technique (hierarchical linear modeling) to observe student influences at school and at home. Whilst the description in Chapter 4 is generalized, Appendix A provides more technical explanations of variables and methods. Their main finding, that once controlling for various demographic factors, public school achievement was equal to or better than private or charter schools, is discussed after a general explanation of the NAEP dataset (pp. 64-65) and the student- and school-level variables used to explore the data, which include school type, student and school demographics, and school location (pp. 65-69).

The authors’ summary includes the takeaways that, amongst other points, school sector plays a small role in predicting academic achievement, especially when compared to student demographics (p. 80). Further, the results raise questions about choice “logic,” since conservative Christian school enrollment has accelerated even though these schools were the “lowest performing school type at both grades” (p. 80). Also important is the evidence that

public schools are performing “relatively well, at least compared with private schools” (p. 80), thus challenging popular claims about the oft-perceived “failure” of public schools (see also Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Berliner & Glass, 2014) and, furthermore, are “raising substantial questions regarding a basic premise of the current generation of school reform” (p. 81).

The Lubienskis acknowledge limitations associated with cross-sectional data, yet confidently defend their analysis as reliable because of robust and consistent results, and due to the large-scale, representative nature of the samples (p. 81). It is significant to note, as well, that at about the same time as the Lubienskis’ research was being conducted, Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg (2006) found similar results, utilizing a slightly different model with NAEP’s mathematics and reading data. Still, as a criticism, some suggested that, perhaps, lower-achieving students enrolled in private or charter schools, which might explain the findings (Forster, 2005, as cited in C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014), or that over the longer term, achievement in private and charter schools would be superior (Stossel, 2006, as cited in C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014). Next, they used ECLS-K longitudinal data, which both addressed cross-sectional limitations and answered these somewhat surprising suggestions from their critics.

### **The ECLS-K Results**

The ECLS-K analysis has advantages of measuring achievement over time and measuring the effectiveness of different factors that can be influential for achievement. In Chapter 5, the Lubienskis explain the rich ECLS-K data gathered using multiple methods, which include not only student and family background details, but also detailed information about students’ classrooms, teachers, schools, and families, collected through surveys, interviews, and observations (p. 85). An analysis of the data answered the criticism from the Friedman Foundation (p. 88) which suggested that lower-achieving students enrolled in private or charter schools. In fact, the authors found, initial raw academic achievement was higher for students in private schools and, still, after controlling for demographics, initial achievement, whilst nearly even

for students in public and Catholic schools, was much higher for other private schools (p. 89). Also, an analysis of achievement over time demonstrated that public school students, who started behind students in other school types, *outpaced* students in Catholic and other private schools. Another detail described by the Lubienskis is relevant to school choice voucher policies: “That is, public school students gained almost a half-year more of learning than demographically comparable students in Catholic schools—the schools most likely to enroll public school students with vouchers” (p. 91).

So, a combination of all of the Lubienskis’ research findings leads to the next discussion about potential causal effectiveness of public schools, premised by the point that, “the vaunted ‘private school effect’ found in past research, while it may exist for some students, is now significantly overshadowed by a public school effect that is evident in the two most prominent national data sets” (p. 92).

## **Causal Effectiveness of Public Schools**

Chapter 6, co-authored with Dr. Corrina Crawford Crane, contains an analysis with both sets of nationally representative data. This chapter includes some of the most interesting analyses, in my opinion, because the results provide a practical understanding for the reasons public schools performed superiorly. Tables and descriptions explain the variables and methods used to explore the data (pp. 98-108), and then the authors move on to discuss specific factors that are different by school sector and that are used to predict academic achievement. The factors included are: school size, class size, school climate, teacher qualifications, and instructional practices (p. 108). These factors are often key in discussions surrounding school effectiveness.

The analyses showed that school size and class size appeared to be insignificant in predicting achievement across the sectors. Regarding school climate, differences were associated with socioeconomic status (SES) more than they were by school sector. On the other hand, teacher certification was positively associated with achievement differences (pp. 115-116). Important context related to this association states:



Since private and most charter schools are free from any requirement to hire certified teachers, there are fewer such teachers in those schools. For example, according to the fourth grade NAEP data, while 89% of public school teachers are certified (in some manner), these percentages are 75% for Catholic schools, 62% for charter schools, and only 44% for conservative Christian schools.

NAEP eighth grade data show similar trends, as well as a greater tendency for teachers in public schools to hold a minor or major in mathematics... (p. 115)

Public school instructional practices were more closely aligned with reform-oriented mathematics teaching practices, and these practices seem to be positively associated with higher mathematics performance in public schools (although the cross-sectional nature of NAEP data provides reason for caution in making definite conclusions [p. 120]). However, ECLS-K data supported these findings, lending extra weight to this positive association. Finally, the authors ran analyses related to socioeconomic inequities, and the evidence suggests that none of the school types are better or worse at teaching students of low or high socioeconomic status.

Overall, the analyses demonstrate that the “private school effect” is a reflection of the advantaged students who attend them, rather than the organizational structure of the schools. Indeed, a “significant public school advantage” (p. 122) is observable and even likely underestimated, especially considering “hidden” factors that cannot be accounted for in statistical analyses, which include advantageous factors such as parent initiative. In other words, evidence provided in this chapter suggests that, despite not being able to consider unobservable factors that give students advantages, public schools still outperform private schools. Public school effectiveness could likely be higher than shown.

## Considerations

Summaries and a discussion about the studies, in the final chapter, include firm and direct challenges to market theory models in education; these are best left for the reader to fully absorb and enjoy rather than to skim over in this essay. The challenges, supported by the evidence provided in the book, point out the contradictions and flaws in educational policies based on assumptions associated with public sector institution “failure” (see also Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Berliner & Glass, 2014), consumer “logic,” and the dangerous point of view that autonomous organizations and leaders will necessarily create better schools.

The authors’ findings, and their intentional compiling of the research for the purpose of making the data and discussion accessible to a wider array of readers is, to me, important, relevant, and timely (over the long-term) for three reasons: (1) current U.S. education reform school choice policies are expanding at federal, state, and local levels, especially in the areas of charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014b) and vouchers, or “scholarship,” programs (see, for example, Arizona Department of Education, 2014); (2) these school choice reform movements exist within a politically- and economically-charged setting, and debates that surround the creation of voucher systems and charter schools—which are considered public schools but which often co-exist with private groups—are often based in ideology rather than on facts (see, for example, Belfield & Levin, 2005), and (3), the implications of policy implementation that promotes certain school sectors over others, without considering evidence related to intended and unintended effects for students, risks neglecting important social equity and justice issues and further segregating and isolating students who live in poverty, who have special education needs, and/or who are English language learners.

Media also influences this politicized and often ideologically-based reform climate (Henig, 2008). In this heated reform climate, the Lubienskis’ book can be seen as their attempt to critically engage with a public audience, using their research evidence as the topic, since it is members of the public who are

directly impacted by these education reforms. Also, the relationship between policymakers and scholars is often identified with a problematic communication gap (Ginsburg & Gorostiaga, 2001), so every attempt to expand the reach of readers is important. The mostly non-technical language provided within the book does engage and challenge, for both public audiences and policymakers alike, dominating ideology and power related to market-based reform practices that are housed in a changing educational environment. Such critical analyses could not be timed better.

After all, school choice reforms are a highly contested area within current U.S. (and beyond) educational policy discussions. In the U.S., school choice reforms have included the creation and expansion of charter school laws in most states throughout the country (Center for Education Reform, 2014). At the federal level, Race to the Top (RTTT) applications for competitive funding required the commitment for states to discontinue the caps on how many charter schools could open (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). Also, more states are creating laws that experiment with vouchers, or “scholarship accounts,” in order to provide for families an option to use tax money for private schooling (see Arizona Department of Education, 2014). A lot of research has been based on the intended and unintended effects of such policies on marginalized students, and has highlighted concerns surrounding inequity, achievement, privatization, democratic accountability of schools and management organizations, and segregation (see, for example, Cobb & Glass, 1999; DiMartino & Scott, 2013; Ertas & Roch, 2014; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Holme & Richards, 2009; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kane, 2009; S. T. Lubienski & C. Lubienski, 2006a; C. A. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Ni, 2009; Wolf, 2010). Amidst vast research that highlights justice-related concerns for students, school choice reform policies continue to grow, and with powerful political influence.

### **Final Thoughts**

The evidence in this book and the authors’ challenge to market theory for schooling is ultimately about the children that schools serve. It is true that

the book directly challenges many of the cultural, political, economic, and ideological beliefs that popularly dominate expanding school choice reform efforts, and it should be noted that the Lubienskis state that they have personally invested in various types of schools, including public, private, and Christian, either through their own schooling, or their children's (p. xviii). So, before critics suggest it, this book is not an ideologically-based bashing about markets. It is evidence-based and concerning. In my reading, the evidence provided in the pages of this book tells a larger story about marginalized students that cannot be ignored—just like child poverty and other individual and societal injustices should not be ignored. Student demographics still significantly matter for student achievement, more than which type of school students attend. So, what I hear in the pages, crying out from the quantitatively-based evidence, are the many voices of children, including those who are able to eat at school because free or reduced-fee lunches (and perhaps free breakfasts) are available to them, those who have fewer home resources, special needs, and/or those who are English language learners. According to the evidence, these students are the ones who many fear will suffer greater inequalities and further segregation because business models guide policymakers to further promote a “winner/loser” approach to education.

Finally, as leaders and community members at all levels work hard now to improve society, schooling as a “market” *ought* to be intelligently scrutinized, lest we are misguided away from our responsibility to better serve all children, or lest we forget lessons learned from the unjust schooling inequalities from our history (*italics are mine*):

Indeed, the idea of education for all may be the best example of the unforeseen difficulties of moving to a market model. In fact, schools were not always a state function, as is evident in the history of most Western democracies. Instead, they were often left to a range of private providers, including religious, charity, for-profit, and family-based models. Education became a *state concern* in the United States only when reformers in the nineteenth century argued that a

laissez faire approach to education led to too much variation, too much inequality, and not enough access to a service that was crucial to the young republic ... (p. 3)

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