

Reviews of "Education in a Robust Political Economy"

Reviewer A:

The paper "Education in a Robust Political Economy" is part of an important discussion that is not made as much as it should. Just the simple answer to the question: "When was the last time you heard someone say they wanted to move to Baltimore to send their kids to Baltimore Public Schools?" or any urban public school system for that matter, should alert us to the importance of examining the system of public education in America. The author makes the case for decentralized education as an alternative to the centralized-planning of the current system well. The importance of addressing this topic is growing, especially given No Child Left Behind and other recent federal intrusions into public education. While not providing its own data, the paper has enough citations to other works to solidify its positions, and may well inspire the reader to examine the cited works.

Reviewer B:

The author(s) start with a devastating litany; demolishing all of the standard excuses for U.S. primary and secondary education system low performance.

P 3: The author(s) note that, "The vast majority of American children, and particularly those whose parents cannot afford a better alternative than their assigned school." But the system doesn't provide many better alternatives; something that this piece needs to document. Typical private schools are part of the problem; though for different reasons than public school low performance. Charter schools are a very mixed bag, and the better ones have been rendered inaccessible to the vast majority by long waitlists. As the author(s) note, better public schools are not much better, and offer few open seats to fill, if any.

P 3; bottom; several typos.

P 3: Repeated reference to: "knowledge deficiencies and misaligned incentives" The authors need to make an explicit connection to the "Calculation Debate", a prominent, if old, classic debate about knowledge and incentives. Here are some references from a paper of mine that dealt with this topic as starting points.

Caldwell, Bruce. 1997. "Hayek and Socialism." *Journal of Economic Literature* 35:4, pp 1856-1890.
Lange, Oskar (ed). 1938. *On the Economic Theory of Socialism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
Heath, Will C. 2007. "Hayek Revisited." *The Independent Review* 12:1, p. 49 of p. 47-70.

P 6: They do this: Parents are prevented from voting with their dollars for the best performing educators and educational methods by a system that geographically ties students and tax dollars to a single school (Spencer, 1966, p. 98). The push for standardized results requires standardized curriculum, texts, and tests, causing each classroom across America to look very similar.

But the choice (via choice of residence) is among non-specialized, relatively uniform alternatives. Such 'choice' yields no individual incentive benefits, and no information about the types of instruction that are most valued.

P 6: This key point needs some revision/correction: "With any government provided public good, there is no market test of consumer demand."

Schooling/instruction is not a public good. It is a merit good. That distinction can be important, but here it is somewhat beside the point. The key specific point is that assigning a school (attendance zones) precludes a market test of consumer demand.

The "Knowledge Problems" section also needs to include the time, place, and quantity issues highlighted by von Mises and Hayek, references cited by the author(s). The Central Planner cannot know the distribution of resources that maximizes the benefits derived from them within the education sector, and between the schooling sector and the rest of the economy.

P 8: "The complaints from parents about protected teachers" - It would be good to back that with some references.

P 11 (last line): "If any "public good" aspects of education exist" - better, for consistency, to replace "public good" with 'positive spillover'.

The Incentive Problems section needs to include some discussion of public sector merit pay challenges. Milton Friedman doubted whether something that rewarded genuine merit was feasible for public sector employees.

P 13: "abstinence in classrooms across the nation, even over the objection of local school administrators and teachers (Zimmerman 1999, 13)The WTCU found success in mandating temperance" - needs period

The textbook adoption process could stand a paragraph or two, including especially a quote from Ravitch on how bad this process is for textbook usefulness.

<http://edexcellence.net/publications/madmadworld.html>

P 15: The just-enacted ESSA needs a sentence or two, at least, after the mention of NCLB. Perhaps preceding it, the 1994 Goals 2000 Act deserves a mention.

http://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/every_student_succeeds_act_-_conference_report.pdf

After reading the "Decentralizing Education" Section, I think it needs a clear definition of the key elements of a decentralized system. Price signals, for example, will not be optimal (possibly much worse) without low entry/exit barriers.

P 16: “It is this paper’s contention that alternative models, based on decentralized market competition, promise better results.” ‘can deliver’ would be better than “promise”. The devil [and god] are in the details.

P 16: This key sentence needs work: “Decentralized education, through market competition, is necessary to utilize the price system to overcome the knowledge and incentive problems inherent in centralized education.”

P 18: ?? “The benefits of competition and withdrawal from government funding can also be seen in the private and charter schools springing up around the country and in the homeschooling movement.“ ??

Charter schools get gov’t funding. With vouchers and education savings accounts deliver gov’t funding to private schools. Tuition tax credits would do it, indirectly.

The issue here is that there are many ways to decentralize, to create competition, to deploy price signals. Some of those ways include substantial gov’t funding of schooling. Let’s not exclude all of the ways that would not withdraw gov’t funding from the discussion; at least not here. Discussion of the different means of achieving decentralization is another paper/article, at least.

Overview: despite the extensive comments, this piece is close to publication-ready, and an appropriate first article for a journal that aims to publish empirical examinations and scholarly commentaries on the broad subject of school system reform. This piece, lacking formal data assessment, is the latter. It qualifies because it already extensively assesses a relevant literature, and with the additions recommended above will be adequately grounded in what we can credibly observe about the state of the U.S. school system, and the vast majority, globally, that have similar features, and a promising direction for school system reform.

Publish after recommended additions and revisions are made.