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Education, Guest Post, Teachers — April 9, 2016

GUEST POST: Education reformers' "School Choice" is a false choice

by [Eclectablog](#)

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The following essay was written by Mitchell Robinson and is cross-posted on his most-excellent blog at [MitchellRobinson.net](#). Robinson is associate professor and chair of music education, and coordinator of the music student teaching program at Michigan State University. Follow Mitchell on Twitter at [@mrobmsu](#). His essay is reposted here with permission.

Enjoy.



A major plank of most education reform agendas is the issue of "school choice." Reformers claim

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Michigan Governor Rick Snyder has known about the poisoning of Flint's drinking water with lead. During that time, **ZERO** lead water lines have been removed through the efforts of his administration.

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that school choice gives parents the power to move their children to "better schools," and gives children a better chance of success. But what if unfettered, unregulated school choice didn't improve academic achievement, and was really a scam designed to defund poor urban school districts and destabilize public education?

School "Choice" is a False Choice

A new landmark study by Michigan State University researchers suggests that this is exactly the case. Dr. Joshua Cowen, associate professor of education at MSU, and graduate student Benjamin Creed, found that, on average, school-of-choice students in Michigan "fare no better on state standardized tests than similar students who stay in their home districts."

Cowen and Creed examined the records of more than 3 million public school students in the state between 2005-06 and 2012-13 and determined that there is no academic benefit to Michigan's popular school of choice program. Cowen makes it clear that families have many reasons for choosing to switch schools, and academics is only one factor among many that parents consider when making the decision to change schools. Issues of safety, quality of facilities, and the variety and richness of program and curriculum offerings also play a role in these decisions for many families. But with nearly 100,000 children now attending schools outside of their "home" school districts, the study's findings [offer a powerful rebuttal](#) to those who claim the goal of school choice is the improvement of academic achievement for children:

"If you looked at say the top 50 schools in Michigan and only looked at the effect of schools of choice there, my hunch would be that you see some big positive results," Cowen told Bridge. "Similarly if school of choice kids only went to the worst 50 schools we'd see big negatives. But that's not how this system - or any choice system - works. If some kids are going to some great schools under school of choice, and others aren't, it's not that surprising to see on average that it kind of turns into a wash."

ZIP Codes and Greener Grass...

As expected, school choice advocates disagreed strongly with the notion that choice may not be working as intended for Michigan's schools.

According to Gary Naeyaert, executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, "We're not surprised that students who choose to leave a traditional public school and attend another traditional public school would show little academic change from the move. Given there are numerous reasons parents choose different schools for their children, we support their right to choose."

Naeyaert's comments here represent an abrupt about-face from his previous position on choice, expressed in [an August 2015 interview](#) on the subject: "We think choice should be expanded and not restricted," Naeyaert said. "A ZIP code should never determine the educational outcomes for children."

In spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, Mr. Naeyaert maintains his belief that school choice results in improvements in "educational outcomes for children." (Of course, [he also goes on to blame parents](#) for not making good choices: "People are looking for a better outcome, and they think a change of scenery might be better. But the grass isn't always greener. Parents have to be good consumers.")

So What's The Point?

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Kasich is the most anti-choice governor, which is like being the worst porta potty at The Gathering of the Juggalos. [eclectablog.com/2016/04/ted-cr...](#)

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So, if switching schools isn't improving student learning, why are parents moving their children from school to school?

Blake Prewitt, superintendent of Ferndale Schools, [believes the situation is more complicated](#) than just increased test scores. "It's rare that someone says my kid isn't doing well so I'm going to move them," Prewitt said. "People move for a myriad reasons. But academics, I believe, isn't a reason. Honestly, a lot of it ends up being demographics (such as socioeconomic and race). There is a part of the populations that feels the grass is greener somewhere else."

But the true impact of school choice policies may have more significant, and devastating, impacts on the health and vitality of our schools and public education in general. When students move from one school district to another in Michigan, a phenomenon termed as "churn" by researchers, state aid dollars follow. Specifically, "State funding of at least \$7,176 follows the student, whether they enroll in their home district or in a school of choice."

This "churn" often results in much-needed tax dollars being siphoned away from high-need urban schools (i.e., Detroit Public Schools, Lansing School District), and reappearing in better-funded suburban districts (i.e., Ferndale, East Lansing). In this educational version of "the rich getting richer, and the poor getting poorer," we are seeing tragic cuts to art and music programs in urban school districts, while wealthier school systems are able to maintain their richer curricular offerings, making their schools more attractive to school choice "churners." And the cycle is perpetuated.

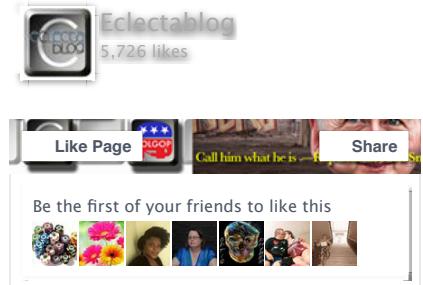
The rationale behind "school choice" is the same logic that explains why so many urban centers are food deserts—big suburban grocery stores have better selections, fresher produce, nicer facilities, etc., and this competition winds up driving smaller, older, often family-owned groceries in cities out of business. This leaves lots of city dwellers without cars in a real predicament—unable to shop for fresh food for their families, forced to buy prepared foods, fast food, etc. It's also why urban centers rarely have home improvement stores, doctors' offices, dentists, and a whole host of other service providers.

The bottom line here is that "competition" is not a solution—it's the reason for many of the problems that we face as a society. And schools are not businesses—the rules that "work" for businesses don't always work in the business world, and certainly don't work in the public schools.

But perhaps more insidious is the finding "that fewer than half stay in that neighboring district. And the students who most often bounce between schools are the students most likely to be hurt academically by the instability... low-income, mostly African-American students who were struggling in their home school districts are the students most likely to switch back out of school of choice, according to the study." These enrollment patterns mirror the typical mobility trends found in urban districts, says Cowen. And research suggests that this mobility, and the attendant instability it generates for learners, is one of the most critical factors in terms of student learning.

In addition to having negative effects on student learning, school choice also contributes to the destabilization of schools and communities in Michigan. In the Oak Park Schools, for instance, 2,121 students travel into the district every day from outside of the district, accounting for 48 percent of the district's enrollment. [At the same time](#), "1,004 young Oak Park residents — about a third of the community's home-grown potential students — departed the city for schools in other communities."

It is hard to imagine that the constant influx and exodus of students in and out of the district has



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no impact on the development of a solid school learning communities, strong relationships among students and teachers, and a healthy sense of identity in the district's schools. With this level of "churn" in the city's schools, what does it really mean to attend the Oak Park Schools, or graduate from Oak Park High School, or to be an OPHS Knight?

The case is clear:

- School choice policies derive no academic benefits for children or schools
- The increased mobility and instability created by school choice policies has a negative effect on student learning
- School choice policies defund and destabilize public schools, fraying the fabric of one of our most important social institutions

So, what should be done?

Better Choices

John C. Austin, President of the State School Board, is a vocal critic of "choice for choice's sake." [Austin asks](#), "If cross-district choice isn't improving education, what is the point?", and offers two alternatives:

1. A financial incentive model that would provide lower levels of state funding for school choice students than for in-district students, encouraging districts to invest in buildings, facilities and programs to dissuade students from seeking school placements in other districts.
2. A "managed choice" system involving enrollment caps and other regulations to ensure the maintenance of appropriate levels of racial and socioeconomic diversity across districts.

"School of choice policy," Austin said, "should be redirected toward improving learning outcomes."

Better yet, let's just eliminate school choice policies entirely. School choice is an experiment that we have seen fail time and time again (Milwaukee, New Orleans, Michigan), and yet the reformers continue beating the same old drum. School choice policies do nothing but siphon billions from struggling school systems and exacerbate the impact of income inequality on America's children.

A far better solution is to call a halt to the school choice "experiment" altogether, and refocus our energies and attention on supporting and maintaining our public schools, making sure that all children have access to a great school in their own community. As comedian D. L. Hughly [pointed out to neocon Dan Señor on Real Time with Bill Maher recently](#),

Why do I have to leave where I came from to go to a school that is not in my neighborhood?

It says everything about where I am from is horrible.

Why is everything better where I am not?

"School choice" is a false choice. No parent should have to move their child to a different community to find a "safe" school, or feel that they have to play the lottery to get their son or daughter a quality education. School choice policies are making it harder and harder for public schools to offer rich, diverse programs in safe, well-maintained facilities as increasing levels of resources are diverted to charter and private schools under the twin guises of "school choice" and "accountability," leaving under-resourced schools ripe for the plucking.



Tony Trupiano

Tony Trupiano is the host of the online radio program **The Voice of the People**, M-F, 9 a.m.-noon.

He is the author of two books and has been part of the progressive media landscape for 20+ years. Follow him on Twitter [@tonytrupiano](#).



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John has been active in the Michigan and national blogospheres since 2004. He writes mostly about LGBTQ issues, health care, disability issues, and the intersection of all three.



Sommer Foster

Sommer Foster is a mom, a social justice activist, and the Director of Policy and Outreach at Equality Michigan. She tweets at [@SNFOSTER](#).

There is nothing "reasonable" about the reformers' agenda of more tests, more accountability for teachers and schools, more charter schools, and more school choice.

Schools are not grocery stores or dry cleaners – when schools close, families are torn apart.

Schools are not businesses – when the product doesn't meet externally-dictated expectations, you can't simply toss out the parts and get a new shipment.

Children are not widgets – when they struggle, we don't discard them; we teach them differently, coach them harder, and love them more.

School choice is just another tired track from the same old reformers' playlist, repackaged as an issue of "social justice" from those who don't advocate for social justice in any other arena. But the end game is the same: punish students and teachers, destabilize schools and communities, and turn the public schools into private profit centers.

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TeacherPattiS • 6 days ago

I feel like I could have written this myself (although not as well :)). Here are some things I have witnessed in my years of teaching: 1) It is a lot about race. I briefly worked in a conservative county west of here. The "big city" had elementary schools that were neighborhood schools and thus pretty well segregated. But everyone went to the middle school together. That is when parents suddenly decided that their kid needed a "faith based education" and sent them to the thriving Catholic school system. Could there have been other reasons? Absolutely. I'm not a fucking mind reader. But it always struck me...

2) Parents play musical chairs with schools. I've had many IEPs with parents who said that they didn't like the teacher at school A so they tried school B and then the kid was picked on so then we tried school C but that wasn't "a good fit" either. (I so wanted to say that life isn't a good fit for most of us, but we learn to adapt).

3) Parents service shop for special education. Some kids are cognitively impaired. It just is what it is. I can't imagine how that feels, not having kids of my own. But if your IQ (and yes, I know the inherent problems with the IQ testing but that's what we use right now) is below 70, you are considered cognitively impaired. I've known a handful of parents who don't dig that "label" and so they district/doctor shopped until the kid suddenly becomes "autistic". Was the kid autistic?

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judyms9 ↗ [TeacherPattiS](#) • 6 days ago

All of your points in response to the article are well taken. My biggest concern is that public schools, once the great shared experience of most Americans, something that unified us and held our communities together, are being destroyed by those whose agendas include classicism and racism. The kids in our neighborhood don't even walk

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to school together any more because they all go to different schools.

That some want to get rid of the Department of Education is just the ultimate symbolic fracturing of the once great American public education system. In other words, it's Wisconsin's governor Scott Walker's guiding principle of "divide and conquer" writ large.

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TeacherPattiS → judyms9 · 5 days ago

And neighborhood schools (at least in my day) did so much more than just teach school. We had meetings there, ice cream socials, parks and rec in the summer. Even just places for us classmates to meet up.

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Judith Pyrah Arnold → TeacherPattiS · 5 days ago

Please don't forget that it's the parents who are making the choice to leave their neighborhood schools. If you've alienated the parents to the point they don't want their kids in your school, then that school isn't functioning as a neighborhood resource that builds community any longer and no ice cream social is going to fix that. Once schools lose the support of the parents in the district then those schools become a liability. But no one in the school system wants to actually work with the parents and listen to their concerns. This is the disconnect. Parents should not be the enemy, yet here we are.

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TeacherPattiS → Judith Pyrah Arnold · 2 days ago

Respectfully disagree. I have seen schools bend over backwards--to the point of not even disciplining students--to keep parents in the district. At most IEPs I have been at, the parent will get what s/he asks for even if it is out of the realm of possibility (e.g. teaching Braille to someone with an IQ of <40, one working hand that does not stay on a page long enough to read anything). People need to trust the experts (us).

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Judith Pyrah Arnold · 5 days ago

Shutting down school choice to force parents to keep their kids in schools they don't want isn't the way to fix this issue. Fixing the schools FIRST so parents are happy to enroll their kids in their local schools is how it ought to be done...but of course it's much easier to take away choices. The problem is, these schools used to get all of the students within their district boundaries and all of that funding, and they were still so bad that parents didn't want to send their kids there and wanted other options. So what would change if all of the students were forced back? Nothing. And THAT is the real problem.

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legrep → Judith Pyrah Arnold · 5 days ago

I couldn't agree more or said it any better. My daughter did just fine attending GRPS as girls often do.

My oldest son did not fare as well. At Grand Rapids Public School's insistence he was tested for ADHD. The results showed that he needed a plan to address his challenges. From that point on GRPS displayed just how incompetent and indifferent they were to solving problems once brought to their attention. Only after threatening to file a federal lawsuit did they begin to accept their responsibilities.

Our youngest was subsequently home schooled and entered a thriving public school system as a well adjusted seventh grader and is doing well as a freshman.

We will not be forced back into GRPS. We're not sacrificing another child on that altar. It's not about race or safety. It's about getting the best return on that \$7,176 and on that measurement GRPS falls short.

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TeacherPattiS → Judith Pyrah Arnold · 2 days ago



I'd like to have a conversation about what "bad" means. When I taught in a rural district (with one "big" inner city), "bad" meant "black" and "poor". I AM NOT in ANY way saying that you are saying that, so don't flame me. But I've found that "bad" means not getting exactly what I want (welcome to life!), disagreeing with a professional teacher who is supposed to be an expert, not "liking" something that a teacher or principal does, not believing that a special snowflake child could ever try to set the room on fire, etc.

Again, in NO way am I saying that is what you were saying. You probably have legitimate beefs.

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Joan C. Grim • 5 days ago

Education privatization is more than a false choice. It represents a loss of a moral conscience. Our political & corporate elite have corrupted the purpose of public education. Our school traditions and loyalties will be hollowed out & lost to the next generation.

<https://lucidwitness.com/2016/...>

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Roscoe Woods • 2 days ago

Great article Chris - Thanks for sharing!

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