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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Why Charter Schools Fail the Test

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THE latest evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the oldest and most extensive system of vouchers and charter schools in America, came out last month, and most advocates of school choice were disheartened by the results.

The evaluation by the School Choice Demonstration Project, a national research group that matched more than 3,000 students from the choice program and from regular public schools, found that pupils in the choice program generally had [“achievement growth rates that are comparable”](#) to similar Milwaukee public-school students. This is just one of several evaluations of school choice programs that have failed to show major improvements in test scores, but the size and age of the Milwaukee program, combined with the rigor of the study, make these results hard to explain away.

So let’s not try to explain them away. Why not instead finally acknowledge that standardized test scores are a terrible way to decide whether one school is better than another? This is true whether the reform in question is vouchers, charter schools, increased school accountability, smaller class sizes, better pay for all teachers, bonuses for good teachers, firing of bad teachers — measured by changes in test scores, each has failed to live up to its hype.

It should come as no surprise. We’ve known since the landmark Coleman Report of 1966, which was based on a study of more than 570,000 American students, that the measurable differences in schools explain little about differences in test scores. The reason for the perpetual disappointment is simple: Schools control only a small part of what goes into test scores.

Cognitive ability, personality and motivation come mostly from home. What happens in the classroom can have some effect, but smart and motivated children will tend to learn to read and do math even with poor instruction, while not-so-smart or unmotivated children will often have trouble with those subjects despite excellent instruction. If test scores in reading and math are the measure, a good school just doesn’t have that much room to prove it is better than a lesser school.

As an advocate of school choice, all I can say is thank heavens for the Milwaukee results. Here’s why: If my fellow supporters of charter schools and vouchers can finally be pushed off their obsession with test scores, maybe we can focus on the real reason that school choice is a good idea. Schools differ in what they teach and how they teach it, and parents care deeply about both, regardless of whether test scores rise.

Here’s an illustration. The day after the Milwaukee results were released, I learned that parents in the

Maryland county where I live are trying to start a charter school that will offer a highly traditional curriculum long on history, science, foreign languages, classic literature, mathematics and English composition, taught with structure and discipline. This would give parents a choice radically different from the progressive curriculum used in the county's other public schools.

I suppose that test scores might prove that such a charter school is "better" than ordinary public schools, if the test were filled with questions about things like gerunds and subjunctive clauses, the three most important events of 1776, and what Occam's razor means. But those subjects aren't covered by standardized reading and math tests. For this reason, I fully expect that students at such a charter school would do little better on Maryland's standardized tests than comparably smart students in the ordinary public schools.

And yet, knowing that, I would still send my own children to that charter school in a heartbeat. They would be taught the content that I think they need to learn, in a manner that I consider appropriate.

This personal calculation is familiar to just about every parent reading these words. Our children's education is extremely important to us, and the greater good doesn't much enter into it — hence all the politicians who oppose vouchers but send their own children to private schools. The supporters of school choice need to make their case on the basis of that shared parental calculation, not on the red herring of test scores.

There are millions of parents out there who don't have enough money for private school but who have thought just as sensibly and care just as much about their children's education as affluent people do. Let's use the money we are already spending on education in a way that gives those parents the same kind of choice that wealthy people, liberal and conservative alike, exercise right now. That should be the beginning and the end of the argument for school choice.

Charles Murray, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, is the author of "Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality."

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