

What the Show-Me Institute will not show us

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The Show-Me Institute is a generally conservative think tank in the state of Missouri. Regional lore has it that early residents of the state were skeptical folk who demanded visual verification prior to agreement. “Show Me” seems a fitting moniker for an organization devoted to carefully scrutinizing public policy.

The Institute’s activities interest me personally because I was born, raised, and attended college in St. Louis, Missouri. Indeed, I attended the same high school as the Institute’s founder.

Like many state and local conservative policy organizations, however, “Show Me” tends to rely on a certain small, introspective group for education research and policy advice. For lack of a better label, let’s call it the CPE Group, after the first name initials of the founding trio, Chester “Checker” Finn, Paul Peterson, and Erik Hanushek. Each brings the considerable resources and reputational weight of powerful institutions along with them. Professors Peterson and Hanushek manage lavishly funded research and policy conglomerates at Harvard and Stanford Universities, respectively. Checker Finn leveraged the resources of an Ohio foundation his father gave him to create his own conglomerate of mostly Washington, DC based advocacy groups. This conglomeration of conglomerates funnels hundreds of millions of dollars of institutional, foundation, and government resources, and retains the loyalty of thousands of mostly politically conservative education policy activists. The CPE Group is the trusted “in house” source of education policy analysis for most mainstream Republicans, and for some Democrats of the “Democrats for Education Reform” variety.

All this firepower can be used for good, or ill. Many appreciate the CPE Group as a counterweight to the similarly amply resourced “education establishment,” the conglomeration of teacher unions, education professional organizations, and education school faculty, which reflexively defends the status quo that employs and empowers them. Certainly, much of what the CPE Group does is valuable.

In one key respect, however, it often behaves much like the rival education establishment has for decades: it censors, suppresses, or misrepresents information from outside the Group. It behaves like an information monopolist. And, the volume of censored information is massive.

Many CPE Group members freely participate in “citation cartels,” citing each other’s work while ignoring or dismissing the vast majority of research and information on a topic. When one of them claims to be the first in the world to conduct research on a topic, they may just mean the first within their small group of no more than a hundred or so partisans. When one of them asserts that no (or no “high quality” or

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“rigorous”) research exists on a topic, they may mean that no one in their group has studied it.

They can get away with this massive purge of information in part because so many rank-and-file conservative policy makers and activists trust them unequivocally. Much like the education establishment they claim to oppose, the CPE Group exploits a tribal sense of loyalty. The world of education research and information is portrayed as just two camps, those who are with us and can be trusted, and those who are against us. Add the reputations of Harvard, Stanford, and those of the several national think tanks they control and the intellectual legitimacy of CPE Group would seem unassailable.

Unfortunately, like all organizations comprised of humans, the CPE Group is quite fallible. And their nose-thumbing derision of other information sources not only narrowly constricts their many followers’ understanding of education policy, it narrowly constricts their own.

Overwhelmingly, CPE Group analysts hail from just a few backgrounds: academic training in economics or political science and work in Washington as congressional staff or political appointees in the executive branch. Few can claim more than a token amount of genuine experience in the day-to-day work of education management and administration.-

Even if one believed that academic training alone was sufficient to understand processes and institutions as complex as those in education, would one choose to rely on training in economics and political science? Psychologists and, to a lesser extent, Sociologists have conducted the overwhelming majority of extant education-relevant research over the past century. Yet virtually all of that research has been dismissed by the CPE Group as non-existent or no good.

One notable area of psychologist expertise encompasses assessment—standardized testing, program evaluation, and the like. Indeed, psychologists invented modern “scientific” testing and its analysis. (The CPE Group classifies these topics under the umbrella term “accountability,” as in “test-based accountability.”)

For some years now, some CPE Group members have recommended replacing state standards-based tests with nationally norm-referenced tests (remember the Iowa or California Tests of Basic Skills?). Nationally norm-referenced tests are much less expensive and have some other advantages. But, they also bear serious drawbacks and, more importantly according to federal case law, they are illegal to use where student test performance portends serious consequences, such as grade promotion or graduation (see *Debra P. v Turlington*).

A few months ago, a CPE Group member posted such a recommendation in the Show-Me Institute's newsletter (see <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/accountability/if-we%E2%80%99re-going-administer-standardized-tests-let%E2%80%99s-make-them-useful>). The author is a recent PhD graduate from the Walton Foundation Funded Education Reform graduate program at the University of Arkansas, run by former students of Harvard's Paul Peterson, the "P" in "CPE Group." The faculty member responsible for teaching the program's "Educational Accountability" course was gracious enough to send me the course syllabus. It contains not a hint of the rich history of relevant research in psychology, sociology, program evaluation, education, or law. Instead, references are limited to work conducted within the inner circle of CPE Group leaders.

Given my personal interest in Missouri education policy, I thought it worth speaking up at the Show-Me Institute website. So, I submitted a comment asserting that their suggestion might be ill advised and could expose policymakers who followed it to lawsuit.

The Show-Me Institute has not posted my comment, which remains, after three months, "pending approval." (You can see it, however, on Disqus, the third comment listed on this page: <https://disqus.com/by/nonpartisaneducation/> .) Meanwhile, they have posted other comments more supportive of the original article. Placing an unwelcome comment in pending-approval limbo can be a passive form of censorship. The comment is not rejected exactly, but it is not posted either. It may remain in limbo forever, or it may be posted much later, by which time the web page has been stored in a seldom-accessed archive and the subject matter is no longer topical.

Perhaps the comment might be considered challenging or threatening to CPE Group members. But, it was not meant for them. It was meant for the Show-Me Institute's readers.

There should be no doubt that CPE Group members are intelligent and accomplished people. But, they do not know everything. Millions of citizens trust and rely on them completely for education policy advice. When the CPE Group blocks information that it doesn't like for reasons unique to its own interests, but contrary to the interests of those who trust them to keep them fully informed, it disrespects its own followers.

Much the same dynamic has played out for over a decade with the Common Core Standards. The CPE Group has promoted the Common Core Initiative, and has been

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well remunerated for it. Those who have disagreed have been characterized as ignorant Neanderthals or progress-hating Luddites. Research and evidence critical of the Common Core Initiative has been ignored or declared nonexistent.

The CPE Group sometimes behaves as if it believes it owns the education policy sections of US citizens' brains, and no information may be allowed in there except through them.