

Beware of Evidence: It Probably Came from the Current System

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If something is found to work, great, but remember it may not work in a transformed system. More important, keep in mind that empirically grounded assertions that something, say merit pay, or school choice, has been found to not work, or have only small effects, arise from studies of the practice or policy *in use in the current system*. It may only mean that it may not work, or not make much of a difference, in traditional public schools. But the allegedly ineffective policy or practice may work well in a different system; that is in the context of different governance and funding practices. [Charles Silberman](#)'s endorsement of [open / informal schooling](#) is quite likely one of those. The weak incentives of the current system may have undermined an instructional approach that can work well for some children as a school of choice in a system lacking public schools' public finance monopoly.

So, when in doubt, at least withhold judgment of freedom/choice – based school system strategies until a genuine experiment yields real evidence. That is especially important in the United States where the default strategy for almost everything has been freedom. It should be the default for schooling too. Lacking direct evidence (someone has to try it to create evidence), we can and should lean on strong support from economic theory and indirect evidence, which means from non-schooling applications of the de-regulation and price decontrol we need for our school system. We know that the price control that pervades school systems has always been a disaster in every industry, and economy-wide, for [forty centuries](#).

However, also keep in mind that some increased freedom, with major restrictions still in place, can yield problems. Likely a good example of that is the profit motive allowed in

combination with price control and/or start-up restrictions. Many of the state charter laws [risk](#) those toxic combinations. Half-measures and half-truths can yield [disaster](#) and alleged evidence can be [disinformation](#), often deliberately as spin; for example the political hack talking point that ‘choice doesn’t make much difference.’ It’s a half-truth, because indeed the empirical basis of the claim are findings from [lousy, restriction-laden experiments](#). Indeed, very little choice makes very little difference to system-wide outcomes.