

# “Common Core Standards for Schooling Markets”

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In a [recent debate](#) of the proposed Common Core education standards, Checker Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a prominent, pro-reform think tank and an Assistant Secretary of Education in the first Bush Administration repeated this phrase from New Orleans’ Public School System CEO Neerav Kingsland: “the urban system, New Orleans, that most resembles a free market system.” It’s a stunning phrase on several levels. First, is that, except for my second point, it is a meaningless phrase that becomes dangerous when school choice and schooling market advocates repeat it; something that is true of Finn and Kingsland. Saying that the conditions of the New Orleans system ‘most resembles a free market system’ is akin to noting that Brest is the closest place in France to the Grand Canyon (it’s still very far), or which 1980’s Soviet-bloc country had the freest markets. The most free was still very unfree. Second, that it is arguably a true statement is useful only to argue that it is shameful that decades after a highly credible, authoritative, non-partisan [‘Nation at Risk’](#) declaration we have yet to even meaningfully experiment with the market-centric approaches that are the norm for the rest of the economy.

By the way, I have no objection to advisory curriculum standards for basic skills like reading and math. That, and test scores to measure performance would help parents make good school choices. Parents will use that information alongside information about schools’ subject themes and pedagogical strategies to decide what is best for their children.

But that’s not what this blog is about. It’s about school system reform discussions’ need for core standards about what on-the-ground features are needed for actual noteworthy resemblance to a “free market system.” For example, in a genuine market, only consumer preferences and financiers regulate market entry and persistence. Neither the government’s rules nor its allocation of subsidies

favor particular consumers or producers. Product scarcity is reflected in price change and both profit and loss are potential outcomes. The New Orleans system has none of those features. No one should imagine that the New Orleans system outcomes remotely reflect competitive market forces in action. Imagining non-existent resemblance endangers the political feasibility of the genuine article. [Milwaukee](#), the other mistaken favorite poster child for schooling markets in action at least allows substantial subsidy for some (means tested eligibility) private school users, and the potential for profit for private schools that manage the Herculean task of producing choiceworthy schooling for the government-set price (no co-payment allowed) of slightly more than half the taxpayer resources available to public schools.