

# Language Policy for Education Reform Discussions, Especially Charter School Discussions

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April 11, 2015

Loose use of key terms is the reason why many school system reform discussions are at least quite frustrating, and often potentially devastatingly counter-productive. For example, I've often heard scholars, and others more likely to deserve forgiveness for not knowing better, assume meaningful 'competition' from a policy granting some opportunities to opt for a different traditional public school, if it isn't full. We can hope that some room to opt for an alternative to the assigned school will generate some productive rivalrous behavior, but we dare not hope that it will be comparable to the truly competitive behavior that must arise from true, direct accountability to footloose customers. And operators of traditional public schools have much less at stake, and much less control of their services, than business owners.

Implying process comparability by applying the same term to choice between outposts of a government agency and choice between independent, private businesses amounts to dangerous hype. Then, when a restriction-laden school choice program underperforms expectations (mistaken hype), it erodes the political feasibility of all school choice-centric school system reform strategies, including those that would actually generate genuine competition. Genuine competition includes the realistic possibility of entrepreneurial market entry, and exit for lack of customers choosing it. Economists call that realistic possibility, 'low barriers to entry'; a critical element of genuine competition. Public school choice doesn't yield any entry, or increased potential for entry. The vast majority of existing U.S. school choice programs and formal proposals don't lower the high entry barrier of the public school monopoly on public funding.

I've covered those competition vs. mere rivalry issues in greater detail, [previously](#). I want to spend the rest of this blog post making a related, but slightly different point about charter law; a state's basis for chartered public schools (CPS). Recall that chartering and the loose use of language is part of a school system reform [doomsday scenario](#). Despite the widespread confluence of the terms choice and competition, CPS can make both concepts look bad because/despite the frequent absence of both. Because charter operators may not decide what to charge for the instruction they offer (price control – pricelessness), and because many families are desperate for an alternative to their assigned traditional public school, most CPS have long waitlists. The possibility that a CPS may open nearby, may provide some useful motivation for traditional public school operators, but if it actually opens nearby the competitive pressures are quickly gone. But observers still widely assume the continuous presence of choice and competition. Choice and competition, as agents of positive change, are on trial, though, often, neither are present. Full, waitlisted chartered public schools can no longer be chosen, and they have no tangible reason to behave competitively. They cannot increase their income by behaving competitively; that is, by trying to attract additional students. They are full. The nearby traditional public schools know they will lose no more students. If area population growth or attendance area boundary change has not already offset the immediate traditional public school losses to the charter, the traditional public schools may have some incentive to regain some the initial losses to the charter. But those incentives are likely to be weak, or perverse. The initial losses will not get anyone laid off, and regaining some of those losses will not earn anyone a raise. Even if the defections are so large and concentrated that a traditional public school is closed, the staff is re-assigned elsewhere in the district. Since there are no pay cuts, many teachers may celebrate earning the same salary teaching a smaller class. Once the nearby CPS amass long waitlists, there are once again no available alternatives to the assigned school, and nothing resembling genuine competition to catalyze change. But if the minimal school system

changes (such as targeted choice or weak charter laws) don't deliver noteworthy academic gains (which they haven't), choice and competition will be widely depicted as ineffective improvement agents.

Loose language can sink reform causes.