

Taking Flak for Being on Target: Vague Denunciation SOP by Defenders of the School System Status Quo

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Jesse Ortiz and I recently co-authored a [chapter](#) in, Improving Lives in Alabama: A Vision for Economic Freedom and Prosperity. On the basis of school system facts like persistent low performance in Alabama, and nationwide, non-controversial core principles like the diversity of children and educators, and the infeasibility of attendance zones for schools that address that diversity with specialized instructional approaches, we argued for a system that would have a dynamic menu of specialized schools of choice. We cited evidence of widespread dis-engagement in the current system's implicit efforts to make comprehensive uniformity fit all.

Because we dared to rigorously, systematically question the public school system's public finance monopoly, we drew fire from local and national defenders of our current governance and funding processes. And it was the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for such denunciations.

1.) They allege lack of due diligence by pointing to the most recent 'more-of-the-same-Harder' (mots-H), sure-to-fail efforts to elicit acceptable outcomes from the structures already in place; and
2.) They make vague references to unspecified alleged evidence that almost always turns out to 'wrong, misleading, and irrelevant'; a phrase that literally describes the central motivation of my critically acclaimed [2001 book](#), The School Choice Wars.

For example, Alabama-based Larry Lee, the former director of the Center for Rural Alabama and a longtime public school advocate, [cited](#) (without any specifics) the new State Schools Superintendent, Tommy Bice's "Plan 2020." If Mr. Bice (2014-2016) had suggested anything but 'mots-H', or Rick Hess's version, "the same thing over and over," it would have surfaced in the outlets that I monitor; where, for example, I learned of the lionization of the new Oklahoma Superintendent's mots-H efforts to stir the [public school system corpse](#). Apparently, it did not even

rise to the level of ‘somewhat new twist’ on recycled failed reforms; more failure to address the classroom [roots of the problem](#) of persistence disengagement and low performance. Despite my low expectations for his efforts, I wish Supt. Bice well. He has to try to make the current system work as well as possible. No matter what kind of reform is undertaken, the public school system will enroll the vast majority of schoolchildren for quite a while, still.

The most amazing denunciation came from the Diane Ravitch blog. Dr. Ravitch is an outstanding education historian. But her exceptional ability to ferret out important facts often does not extend to comprehension of what they mean. Both Dr. Ravitch and Dr. Helen Ladd (cited in the [article](#)) said the ‘school choice evidence’ does not support the Merrifield-Ortiz assertion that school choice expansion will yield improved student outcomes. That shameful over-generalization of studies of small, restriction-laden school choice expansions is quite common. As I’ve often pointed out (my 2008 *Journal of School Choice* article), and everyone agrees when pressed, the evidence that has been generated by the recent minor expansions of school choice, in the U.S. and abroad, do not provide guidance on the likely outcomes of the large, low-restriction versions recommended by Merrifield-Ortiz. And charter school experience only minimally qualifies as any kind of ‘school choice evidence’. The nearly [ubiquitous charter waitlists](#) (shortages) that result from pricelessness make it school chance, not school choice.

Ravitch and Ladd are ‘self-refuting’. They often provide the evidence that refutes what they assert other evidence means. For example, in the beginning of Dr. Ladd’s [widely cited book](#) about the New Zealand public school choice policy reform of the 1990s, she describes it as an example of large, unrestricted school choice. Towards the end of the book, she provides a detailed refutation of that assertion. The New Zealand policy excludes private schools, places significant restrictions on transfers among public schools, and rules that apply to all subsidized schools allow for very little difference between schools. In another words, the ostensible school choices differ very little. New

Zealand is yet another [lousy school choice experiment](#), but it is cited widely as a failure of school choice, generally; wrong, misleading, and irrelevant except to limited public school choice.

Dr. Ravitch's transformation from brilliant education historian to blogger and paid political hack is even more incredible than Ladd's failure to fully absorb the contents of her own findings. Ravitch makes the same shameful generalization of the evidence derived from small, restriction-laden, lousy experiments to school choice, generally. And she vaguely alludes (political hack SOP) to an alleged, relevant body of evidence that Merrifield-Ortiz failed to consider. If it exists, she also failed to consider it, or condemned it already in, for example, her books, [The Language Police](#), [Left Back](#), and [Death and Life of the Great American School System](#) (2010). I often cite her studies of education system history, and the [2010 book](#) that launched her re-embrace of a system whose persistent failings she has documented better than anyone, and the article ("[Adventures in Wonderland](#)") that describes her service in the 'bowels of the beast.'

From time as George H. W. Bush's (the elder) Assistant Secretary of Education, Dr. Ravitch concluded that, "federal K-12 policy was a special interest candy factory driven by congressional committee staff." That, and her conclusion in [Left Back](#) that, "there never was a Golden Age" is enough (there's much more like all of her, [Language Police](#)) to make you wonder how her 2010 book can assert that it is a great system. Since the Golden Age-less system is declining from whatever its low high point was, and the roots of the problem remain intact, she is likely, at best, guilty of hope triumphing over experience, especially her own. I suppose we can appreciate her optimism that it will not take a transformation of officials' incentives to act differently for the system to suddenly make the changes that would actually yield the improved outcomes we all know must be forthcoming to keep our country from further economic and political stagnation.

The [description](#) of the persistently terrible outcomes of the New York City system cited in my [previous blog](#) is an interesting sidebar to the Ravitch re-embrace of the current K-12 system.

Dr. Ravitch lives in New York City and has studied that system extensively. As the author of the *Post* [article](#), schooling entrepreneur and City Councilwoman Eva Moskowitz, notes, “it’s easy to harbor romantic ideas about public education,” as Ravitch does, if it worked at least acceptably well for you. But ‘acceptably well’ is not the norm, despite high and long-time rising levels of per-pupil spending in New York, in Alabama (where the Merrifield-Ortiz recommendations received their initial airing), or anywhere. What will make priceless political control (central planning) outcomes differ to begin to yield dramatically improved schooling outcomes? So far, for decades, the behavior and outcomes are unchanged from what Ravitch and others have extensively documented.

The changes recommended by Merrifield-Ortiz will deliver changed policymaker, parent, and student behavior in a way that will drive major change. The responses of Larry Lee, Helen Ladd, and Diane Ravitch demonstrate agreement on that. But they equate the well-being of schoolchildren with the fate of the public school system; that choice expansion would, in effect, amount to a “raid” on the system. So, they believe that the public school system, not schoolchildren, own school taxes, and that, voluminous evidence to contrary, fewer total dollars in that system, even with increased per pupil funding, would diminish the public school system’s effectiveness. Also, consistent with that belief, but contrary to the [evidence from past per pupil funding growth](#), the system’s defenders insist that additional funding is the answer and that low socio-economic status as a learning disability, not poor public school system performance, is the reason for persistently disappointing school system outcomes. Eva Moskowitz’s NY *Post* article refutes the low income = learning disability assertion of school system reform opponents.