

“The Recurrent Tragedy of Lousy Experiment Disputes”

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Successive, debilitating disputes arise from the widespread failure to recognize lousy experiments for what they are, which in Jason Riley’s Feb 5 *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed, “[Obama’s Education Fibs](#)”, was about the restriction-laden, ‘priceless’ [Milwaukee](#) low income voucher program. Riley was reacting to part of President Obama’s brief pre-Super Bowl chat with Bill O’Reilly. Asked by Mr. O’Reilly why he opposed school vouchers that “level the playing field” and “give poor people a chance to go to better schools,” President Obama replied, “Actually, every study that’s been done on school vouchers says that it has very limited impact, if any.”

President Obama’s over-statement of the findings of [U.S. tuition voucher studies](#), though reasonably accurate for the latest, [best overview of the evidence](#), did not address Mr. O’Reilly’s question about vouchers that “level the playing field.” The only publicly funded U.S. tuition voucher programs that “level the playing field” limit eligibility to special needs children. No existing or former, publicly funded U.S. tuition voucher programs “level the playing field,” even for targeted low income students or failed school students. Even the best example, the privately funded, temporary [Edgewood Program](#), did not nearly level the playing field. Sadly, many people see citing evidence from tiny restriction-laden programs as an acceptable answer to a question about a very different policy – one that would level the playing field and hopefully lack other common restrictions including ‘price control’ – that would hardly resemble existing restriction-laden programs. And, contrary to Bill O’Reilly’s implicit assumption that a level playing field only impacts “poor people”, a level playing field would improve the menu of schooling options for all but the wealthiest Americans.

Jason Riley cited some noteworthy Milwaukee program participant effects to dispute President Obama's small effects claim, but the fact remains that at the school system level, school choice program impacts have been imperceptible, probably because market conditions have been absent. Pricelessness has probably been an especially significant factor. Milwaukee private schools must achieve better results, after the student struggles in the assigned public school and then undergoes a disruptive school change, with about 60% of the Milwaukee Public Schools' per pupil funding.

Despite mountains of theoretical 'evidence' and indirect evidence (track record of markets vs. the central planning alternative) to support my explanation, I said 'probably' for lack of direct, contemporary U.S. evidence to substantiate my causal claim. Some real experiments could be critical if we can't move forward on productive school system reform without direct, contemporary U.S. evidence. Waiting for that evidence from real experiments to emerge, be analyzed, and politically processed will yield very costly delays, but as the 1979 UK experience (future blog), among others, showed, we may not make much progress without such evidence. In the meantime, school choice advocates should not characterize incremental school system and school choice changes in the non-market status quo as useful market experiments, and they should dispute the assertions of reporters and opponents like President Obama when they do it.