

The Separate Realities Smoking Gun



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On March 13, I speculated that [Charles Glenn's wariness](#) of market accountability for schooling could be the result of a distorted view of markets in action for schooling; a result of relying on [lousy experiments](#), especially the price controlled, low-income-targeted Milwaukee tuition voucher program. [Reaching the same conclusion](#) for Mike Petrilli's assertion that market forces have not done the job was a little less speculative. Now we have the '[Smoking Gun](#)' in the hands of Petrilli's edexcellence.net colleague, Kathleen Porter-Magee. She wrote:

"Take, for instance, the experience in Milwaukee, where the nation's first voucher program demonstrated that market forces alone weren't enough to drive quality, particularly in urban areas that serve predominantly poor and minority students."

But Milwaukee's schooling 'markets' are severely distorted by the absence of nearly all of the key characteristics of high performing markets; scarcity-driven price change, profit potential, no entry barriers. Eligibility is capped at low income and for a long time participation was capped at a small fraction of the eligible. If we keep giving school system reform opponents quotes from school system reform supporters saying that markets have disappointed, we will make the most promising reform strategy, true market accountability, politically infeasible.

One of the things we need to do is give up on the things that haven't budged the school system off of persistent failure, including things that could work in a different system. True market accountability is not one of the things that have been tried and failed. Primary and secondary education with true market accountability has yet to be tried in modern times,

anywhere, even as an experiment; something difficult to do as an official experiment because the aura of possible cancellation will stifle many of the entrepreneurial responses to real market conditions. We learned that from the [Edgewood experience](#). We saw some market entry and rivalry at first, when permanence was perceived as possible, but with low capital commitments because of the uncertainty about permanence. In the early years of the voucher program, the Edgewood public schools performed better than they ever have, before or since, but when termination of the Edgewood vouchers was seen on the horizon, public school outcomes gradually lapsed back to the low performance, one-size-for-all school system norm.