

The 1979 UK Experience: School Choice Plan Abandoned for Lack of Evidence

John Merrifield
February 9, 2014

Not well-known is that the incoming Thatcher Administration was eager to include primary and secondary education in its list of industries to be transformed by greatly strengthening market accountability. But they backed away from the transformative medicine they applied to most British industries when they could muster only theoretical arguments for their proposal to establish a large, unrestricted universal tuition voucher. They had heavy hitters including E.G. West and Milton Friedman to make the case, but it [wasn't enough](#) to overcome the political cost of being the first to do something 'radical'; radical in terms of the scope of change, but not so radical when seen as applying to schooling the same accountability processes that guide the vast majority of industries. Being the first to propose something, by definition, requires the policy entrepreneurship to implement programs with no track record.

This important lesson in the timidity of politicians – many representatives of the status quo, little visionary leadership – says we better place a high priority on development of [data](#) that would facilitate easy, credible school system comparisons, and spare no effort in the development of genuine policy experiments. That means finding a large school system, probably one riven with frustration with previous failed reform attempts, with leadership willing to be first in implementing major policy changes without direct evidence of how those changes have performed elsewhere.