

Nevada ESA Conversation in the *Wall Street Journal* Reveals Numerous Debilitating Fallacies

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September 2, 2015

I appreciate that a lot of people took the time to comment on the *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed ([Nevada's Voucher Breakout](#)) on the Nevada Education Savings Account law. But it was painful to see so many awful fallacies peddled as compelling arguments, by pro-reform advocates and establish hacks, alike.

The comments contained more fallacies than I could keep track of. The following rant will fail to address some of them.

1.) It makes no sense to compare the outcomes of current public (incl Charter) and current private schools. The latter are an outcome of a system that is both dysfunctional and makes it very difficult to offer something privately in the face of a 'free' alternative supported by ~\$13,000/child/year in public funding. It's because of that that private schools are mostly non-profit, church-run enterprises. If we had a system in which we did not discriminate against families that thought private offerings were a better fit for their child, the menu of schooling options would be very different from the one we see now.

2.) The two key problems with traditional public schools is weak/perverse incentives, which is a public sector norm, and the utter inability to make one size fit all. Public schools have worked reasonably well for a lot of people (though costing too much), but ALL of them leave a lot of children behind because children are diverse and one size will not fit all.

3.) Schooling, public or private, is [NOT a public good](#). Proof of that is that we can (shouldn't) exclude non-payers, if we want to. Schooling is a MERIT GOOD, which unlike true public goods, can be produced privately, and generally should be, though the merit aspect argues for some subsidy, a mix of public and private funding.

4.) Chartered public schools are NOT school choice. They are mostly 'school chance'. The government sets the price paid to the charter operators at a level such that the vast majority of chartered public schools cannot meet the demand at the consumer price of zero set by the government. Economists widely, if not unanimously, agree that persistent shortages are a recipe for scandalous short-cutting; that is product quality reduction. Price-less, profit-less charter systems may improve on the preceding status quo, but they do NOT represent markets in action; maybe badly distorted markets, since price change and profit-seeking are central to markets. Indeed, many are no better than the nearby traditional public schools, though inter-state charter-traditional comparisons are mostly exercises in nonsense. Charter laws differ very widely between states, and the diversity under the charter label is much greater than any general difference between charter and traditional public.

5.) Teacher talent, like student ability, is [not one-dimensional](#). Teachers, like other human beings, have strengths and weaknesses and we employ them in a system that makes it almost

impossible to exploit their strengths and escape their weaknesses. We expect them to be everything to everyone - sorting the children we put before them only by age and place of residence - and then wonder why there is teacher-bashing; why some people believe teachers, generally, are ineffective. Don't we have to wonder about a system that creates such impressions? One of the ways in which we make teachers that could be effective in some classroom settings seem ineffective is rampant out-of-field teaching, which is an outcome of salary schedules that don't differentiate by different types of teaching skills. For example, math-credentialed teachers are often much harder to hire for the standard rate, so we end up with a lot of math classes being poorly taught by teachers that would do a great job teaching English or history.

The political process creates classroom environments that make teaching as difficult as it can be made without having that as a formal objective. One much-needed imperative is ability-grouping by subject, regardless of age. It pops up sporadically, but it is widely politically incorrect because careless inspection (one-dimensional thinking) makes [ability grouping by subject](#) look like tracking. Tracking is dumb because most students are not uniformly low- or high-ability, and tracking seems unfair, and it is. Students have strengths and weaknesses.

6.) Imagined school supply constraints: The supply of public school alternatives is not etched in stone. That supply will quickly increase if we end public funding practices that discriminate against families that believe the assigned school is a bad fit for a child. Because of politics and perverse incentives, some public schools are utterly dysfunctional. But the rest, including the very best at what they do, simply aren't a good fit for everyone in their attendance area; often some good fits and bad fits in the same family.