

Why Defend Sweden's Program – Another Lousy Experiment/Example

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October 15, 2014

We need to stop reflexively defending [lousy experiments](#) (restriction-laden school choice expansions). The pro-transformation folks at the National Center for Policy Analysis, [Education Next](#), and the supposedly economically literate staff of [The Economist](#) also felt obliged to explain that the Swedish version of ‘school choice’ was not to blame for Sweden’s recently declining test scores. For reasons described in detail in the various defenses, other factors seem at fault for Sweden’s test score decline, but that’s not the key point to make. Sweden’s policy warrants low expectations. Sweden has only limited pedagogical choice. 95% of schooling content for all Swedish schools, public and private, is prescribed by the mandated national curriculum. And only the pedagogies that can be delivered for the government-provided per pupil funds can be choices. Yes, you guessed it, pricelessness; something you might think worthy of mention at least by *The Economist*, which means ‘price theorist’; a comment from someone that understands the role of price change, or lack thereof, in industry outcomes. All Swedish schools that receive government money must be ‘free’. They must accept government-funded vouchers as full payment. The government-prescribed per pupil funding level amounts to a price ceiling that creates shortages of the best financially-feasible schooling options. Shortages create [scandal risk](#) because shortages eliminate accountability to customers.

Limited, price-controlled pedagogical choice is better than no choice, but it is not capable of yielding noteworthy performance improvements. Such limited change is not a transformation catalyst. I understand school choice advocates’ ‘guilt by association’ concern when any school choice expansion policy seems to be ineffective at driving improvement. But the bigger risk to the school choice movement is disappointment with imagined market-based reforms, especially highly

touted policies like the [Milwaukee tuition voucher program](#). Click [here](#) for the latest example of condemnation of market-based school system reforms on the basis of priceless, profit-less policies; policies that are not market-based. Small effects from small restriction-laden school choice expansions present opportunities we cannot afford to miss; a chance to argue for the key policy elements we need to achieve productive school system transformation.

Coincidentally, as I was preparing this, I got an e-mail from another great group of pro-transformation, school system reform scholars and advocates. They wanted to know what we'd do to explain (damage control) a report claiming that the Chicago experiment with chartered public schools was a [flop](#). Next time, I will explain that this is another [lousy experiment](#); the outcome of a weak, [getting weaker charter law](#).