

## With Friends Like These, . . . : Old Arguments and Every Fallacy

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Of course I'm sympathetic to the general proposition that tuition vouchers can be a key part of a school system transformation, but the ['Economics21' pro-choice salvo](#) was not a welcome addition to the political battle to achieve a productive transformation of our K-12 school system. It contains ammunition for school system reform opponents, and makes easily refuted, sweeping generalizations. The title contains the 'one dimension' fallacy. There are "lousy schools" because some public schools are utterly dysfunctional, but the majority of public schools work well for some of the children assigned to them, and all of them work poorly for some of the children assigned to them. Because 'one-size-cannot-fit-all' even public schools rated 'great' by state rating systems that try to condense multiple dimensions of school quality into a single grade still produce poor aggregate outcomes, and would lose many students to large, unrestricted voucher, tax credit, or education savings account programs (ESAs).

Speaking of the school choice policy options, the Economics21 article implies that "specifics" don't matter much, but the examples they allude to, but do not describe, show that specifics matter a lot. The article focuses on tuition vouchers even though there better ways to make it easier to opt out of assigned public schools. [Tuition tax credits and ESAs are better](#), functionally and politically than vouchers, but there is no mention of those. Other specifics like universality, little regulation of schooling content, and opportunity for co-payment (shared financing to avoid price control) received no mention. To the contrary, the article noted that Milton Friedman's voucher proposal inspired Chile's voucher program without noting key differences between Friedman's proposal and Chile's policy, especially tight central government control of public and private schooling content. The Economics21 article lauds [the Milwaukee](#)

[voucher program](#) without criticizing its price control, non-universality, or low amount (~60% of public school funding). And the Economics21 article missed the assessment that the [Milwaukee system remains an urban basket case](#); that the Milwaukee voucher program did not produce the market accountability benefits Economics21 said would result from any voucher program, when those benefits are likely only from voucher programs that have not yet been adopted anywhere. The Economics21 article notes the shortage of charter school places without noting the economic fundamentals underlying shortages, and just a few lines away from an assertion that voucher users can choose any school. Milwaukee-like bans on shared financing yield shortages at some private schools, and that doesn't include the un-met demand for private schools that would exist with price decontrol.

The Economics 21 easily challenged assertion that current private schools are better than public schools is 'supported' by a Catholic Schools' web address, not a neutral source. And the assertion is irrelevant. Introduction of genuine competition would create a much different mix of private schools than the ones present in the current system.

The Economics21 article's speculation that, "the public school system may deteriorate" is an unfortunate expression of the probably intended prediction that, 'the public school system will lose market share'; a phrase sure to be cited in reform opposition talking points. "Deteriorate" is not nearly the same as the 'lose market share' actual likely effect of large, unrestricted voucher programs.

The Economics21 essay also says that the effect of vouchers is to provide low income families the same options available to "wealthy families." Except for perhaps the top 1%, the competitive pressures likely to be unleashed by a true Friedman-style voucher, but not any of the

programs named, would fundamentally change the choices available to all families. We should not be reinforcing the [devastating fallacy](#) that the current system only serves the poor badly.

We can count on the defenders of the K-12 funding and governance status quo to exploit fallacies and rely on half-truths. But, please, can we avoid helping them. Without the much-needed, increased sophistication in which policy specifics are pursued and the arguments made for them, we will fail to increase the political feasibility of productive school system transformation.