

The Commonal

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2014

Beltway Liberals and their Schools of Choice

ABOUT

"Where anything is growing, one former is worth a thousand reformers."

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There's a certain breed of liberal beltway pundit whose admiration for charter schools exceeds rational explanation. What exactly compels credentialed liberals like Jonathan Chait and Matt Yglesias to stand cheek by jowl with Eric Cantor and Paul Ryan on [school choice](#) without batting an eye? I won't bother to speculate (until later).

Jonathan Chait just wrote a [piece](#) called "Public Education's Weird Ideological Divide" in which he ponders why education politics are so darn tricky. The impetus was a [Bloomberg story](#) describing the shameful attempts of a wealthy Baton Rouge enclave to secede from its district: "an educational divorce from a neighboring community where four out of 10 families live in poverty."

Chait uses this as a tangential excuse to wave the charter school banner. First he conjures a hypothetical school arrangement that he apparently believes describes reality:

The main ideological split lies over what kind of public schools we should have.... Neighborhood schools are open to children who live close by and restricted to everybody else. Charter schools are open to all children in the city, and their slots are allocated by lottery.

He then presents his enlightened progressive readership a quandary in [terms](#) generally employed by [ALEC members](#): you can either condemn students to their "geographically segregated" community schools, or let them into citywide "open admissions" lotteries, which presumably foster integration.

Unremarkably Chait's been blinkered by introductory reform rhetoric. When he writes that charters are "open to all children in the city," he must be excluding, as charters often do, children with moderate to [severe disabilities](#), the homeless, kids learning English, and those on the bottom end of the income spectrum.

What Chait sees as a structure of inclusion is predicated on mechanisms of exclusion that tend to widen disparities. When charter proponents talk about the desegregating potential of charter schools, they argue from aspiration, not experience.

Chait complains that educational "lefties" harbor "a deep suspicion of any attempt to apply empirical metrics" to school politics. Well, empirical metrics on charters and segregation do exist, and they're telling.

The [most recent review](#) of the scholarly evidence, by George Washington University's [Iris Rotberg](#), finds "a strong link between school choice programs and an increase in student segregation by race, ethnicity, and income." The same

holds for students with disabilities and English language learners. Charter policy in the US generally fails at integration.

There are various reasons for this. As Stephanie Simon documented, charters nationwide use sundry means to cull the student populations they want, from 15-page admissions essays to policies barring special needs students.

There are zanier schemes. One charter in Philadelphia (itself a swamp of charter scandal and corruption) made its applications available only one day a year, at a tony golf club in the suburbs. Charter networks that recruit affluent students are burgeoning in the south; a chief academic officer at one lamented, "diversity is really hard for us." A charter in New York sought, according to internal recruitment memos, "middle/upper income, predominantly white" families. All of the above charters unsurprisingly enroll disproportionate shares of white students.

Most charters don't resort to these shenanigans, though. A few even expressly aim to promote integration. But open-admission, lottery-based schools implicitly discourage students who lack the resources to apply. Within many charter schools, academic demands and no-excuses disciplinary models push out the neediest students. A recent New York study found that 80% of students with special needs entering charters in kindergarten leave by third grade. Citywide, the proportion of special education students in district schools is double that of charters.

In Newark, charter schools cluster at the high end of the income distribution, enrolling far fewer students who qualify for free lunch. A study of charters in North Carolina, found that "many forms of school choice result in some degree of cream-skimming," that is, patterns of "some schools enrolling more advantaged or high achieving students" than in community schools.

The aggregate effects of charter-based segregation are stunning. In 2009 the UCLA Civil Rights Project found that "At the national level, 70 percent of black charter school students attend intensely segregated minority charter schools ... or **twice as many as the share of intensely segregated black students in traditional public schools.**"

So much for empirical metrics.

Charter schools provide a conduit by which public school populations can be segregated. Chait and others imagine choice systems as roulette wheels, every student with the same odds. But they're more like slot machines. In their basic programming, they favor the house. In the real world of immigrant children, byzantine choice systems and tome-length application materials, charters cultivate winners and losers.

The crucial distinction between community- and choice-based systems are the mechanisms of exclusion unique to the latter: attrition and expulsion (always *from*

and never to charters), ability-sorting and special needs limitations, applications and admissions. Systematic inclusion requires conscientious and active efforts, while exclusion passively exploits disparities wherever and however a population can be cleaved. The choice machine, with its mechanisms of exclusion, serves to deepen endemic inequalities.

When centuries of accrued disparities weigh on a system, even the slightest cracks can widen into gulfs—through which the most vulnerable fall.

So what makes a school public? Spurred by the same odious story out of Baton Rouge, Slate's Matt Yglesias takes a whack at the question: "A public school is by no means a school that's open to the public in the sense that anyone can go there." Schools, he notes, aren't like public parks.

Though a gung-ho charter backer, Yglesias suggests quite reasonably that "this is a housing policy problem masquerading as an education policy one." Where he gets tripped up is the idea that "charter schools—unlike 'public' schools—have to admit (or not admit) students on an equal basis regardless of which neighborhood they live in."

It's a sentiment marred only by reality. In Yglesias's DC, for instance, charters expel students at a rate over 70 times that of district schools. Students with disabilities are continually underrepresented in DC charter schools. In what sense is this an equal basis?

But there are deeper questions to consider in the charter-public riddle. Charters are privately managed, sometimes for a profit, but they receive public funding and answer to the same test-based accountability systems. So what makes them less public than district schools?

In his piece, Chait brings up some union hack named Diane Ravitch so as to cavalierly dismiss her book without so much as hinting that he read it. But in her book Ravitch spells out how charters differ legally from public schools. "When it is time for funds to be distributed," she writes, "they want to be considered public schools. But when they are involved in litigation, charter operators insist they are private organizations, not public schools. The courts and regulatory bodies have agreed with the latter point."

She cites a 2010 case in Arizona in which the court rejected the claim that the charter was a "state actor." In New York, charters won a court case to evade state audits, requiring the legislature to pass a charter audit law. The National Labor Relations Board, which characterized charters as "private, nonprofit corporations," found them to be exempt from its labor jurisdiction.

It's not just the "facts on the ground" that Chait and Yglesias ignore. It's the very governance issues that they've made their careers out of futzing over. In a democratic society, constituents exert some measure of control over the commonweal and its institutions. Privately managed charter schools undermine this basic premise. It's no surprise that charters have proliferated in cities like

Chicago and New Orleans where mayors or states have seized control of the schools from democratically elected school boards.

So what's wrong with these pundits? Any number of factors may be at work.

Comfortable white guys tend to appreciate the rhetoric and marketing surrounding charter schools, which invariably stress how charters embody the civil rights struggle of our time. But more importantly, Chait and Yglesias aren't on the losing end of choice systems. They don't send their kids to schools slated for closure, or to schools that endure sudden disproportionate shocks of challenging students. School choice systems, earnestly geared towards equality, are erected on the backs of the most disadvantaged. These folks generally don't get great media coverage.

But I suspect it's something more. When Chait takes a principled stance for the uninsured or Yglesias agitates for guaranteed minimum wage, they're siding with the less fortunate *en masse*. School choice policies and charters divide historically underrepresented people. As public school parent and advocate Zakiyah Ansari recently told me, charters create a "divide and divisiveness. And if we're being honest, it's between parents of color."

That vexes a pundit who's liberal in general but removed in practice. In this case an enormous reform industry promotes one side of the equation, with only unions and their lefty allies, in Chait's eyes at least, taking the other side. It's no surprise who wins that media contest.

To wit: The Bloomberg report about East Baton Rouge's monied secessionists left out a notable fact. The same school district that Chait and Yglesias valorously defended from the depredations of the wealthy is slated to lose \$20 million in state revenue when at least five new charters open there, siphoning away per-pupil funding. "Our biggest concern," said a district administrator concerned about charter expansion, "is money going out the door."

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