

Excuses, Deception, and Intellectual Prisoners of the K-12 Status Quo

**By John Merrifield,
Professor of Economics
Director, Entrepreneurial Conservatism Institute
November 20, 2006**

One of the critical challenges of entrepreneurial K-12 reform efforts is getting people to think outside the box created by the existing system. As we all know, ignorance is a much smaller problem than beliefs that are false. A lot of cause-effect assumptions are the result of decades of political control of schooling, public school uniformity, and giving much larger subsidies to users of the traditional neighborhood public school. Users of chartered schools get smaller subsidies, and private school users have to pay twice.

One assumption constantly asserted by school choice opponents is that race will play a major role in school selection. Race has been a smaller factor than is often asserted, and it will be a smaller factor in a free enterprise-driven system of competing schools of choice than it is in our current system. In parent surveys, student body composition ranks below academic issues. But our current system exaggerates the importance of race by eliminating most of the potential academic differences between schools that would be compelling reasons to prefer some schools over others. Because of uniformity in academic policies, race can easily become the highest ranking actual difference between the available schools, and thus the choice determinant.

Because church-run schools dominate existing private schooling options, many people see school choice through vouchers or tax credits as separation of church and state issues. But churches dominate private schooling now only because churches have huge advantages in performing the super-human feat of getting some people to pay for something that is already available for no additional charge beyond taxes that must be paid. Churches can cheaply offer something public schools cannot (religion), and they can use other sources of income to keep the tuition below the full cost of the schooling. Ending the public school monopoly on school taxes would expand secular private schooling much more than church-run school enrollments. Since many people currently use church-run schools despite the religion aspect, increased availability of secular choices might even shrink churches' share of school enrollments.

Because existing private schools do not serve a very large share of the population, and few are profitable, it is often asserted/assumed that they cannot serve everyone. Supposedly, they 'dump' the hard to educate on the public school system,

and keep the easy-to-educate rich kids. Indeed, the opposite is much closer to the truth. Chartered public schools and private schools specialize in alternative education and innovative methods effective with some kids often succeed where public schools have failed. Many children are sent to such schools by the public schools.

Because school choice programs of any kind are new and rare, they are often called experiments. Within the severe limitations imposed on the rare U.S. school choice programs, they are experiments. But none of them are experiments in market-driven schooling. The widespread delusion that choice expansion, however limited, creates a market experiment may be the most debilitating false assumption. Lackluster results of restriction-laden choice could slander market-driven school reform to the point where we give up on it before it actually receives a fair trial.