

Choice Thinking:

Why does the public ignore, distort or reject school choice facts and arguments?

by

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Abstract

A powerful, yet flawed perspective grips the public mind such that it ignores, distorts, and rejects school choice facts and arguments. Just as the Church rejected Galileo's scientific findings, this public school ideology rejects choice supporters' educational findings and analysis. The public simply cannot fit a market perspective into its understanding of how the world works. We will not make major strides toward school choice if we continue to believe that simply teaching the public about the benefits of market education or tinkering with choice proposals will be enough. A new market perspective can't be simply taught. It must develop, like any living system develops, out of its more primitive pro-government form. Our challenge is to understand this transformation. We cannot change the public's thinking if we do not understand it.

The Problem

Voters in state after state continue to defeat school choice initiatives by large margins. Choice supporters respond by debating strategies such as vouchers or tax credits, whether large or small steps should be attempted, how we should deal with the critics, and what kind of information and examples should be given to the public.

But what if such strategic decisions by themselves have little to do with successfully changing the public's fundamental point of view regarding choice? What if facts and evidence alone aren't enough for the public to accept our

ideas? What if our principles of choice and competition are not only misunderstood by the

public but also actively rejected as dangerous to public education?¹

In his research Andrew Coulson found that five factors lead to excellence in a market education system: choice and responsibility for parents, freedom and competition for providers, and the profit motive.² These make wonderful sense to him, to us, and probably to you. But what if they don't make sense to the public? We believe something quite fundamental, what we call the pro-government perspective, organizes the thought processes of most people and renders them incapable of understanding the

facts and evidence that a coherent free market mental perspective provides. Markets simply don't make sense to them.

The logic of market principles is compelling to us but obviously not to most other people. And it's clear that it does not matter what type of program is proposed. Small tax credits and limited voucher programs for low-income families are tolerated by the public as ways to solve particular problems but they do not convert people to an understanding of a market-based system.

Americans enjoy one of the freest and most bountiful market systems in the world yet few can explain how it works. An understanding isn't necessary to reap its benefits. But markets promise nothing except opportunities and choices, while government can promise much.

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With little understanding of markets and government monopolies, government promises and market fears can be enough reason for the public to reject market proposals. Neither critics nor choice supporters actually change the public's underlying perspective on free markets and government. The critic's rhetoric simply triggers already felt sympathies and a comfort with the government school system. The burden of changing public opinion rests with choice supporters. As a result, critics find it easy to defeat choice initiatives simply by playing on public fears and misunderstanding.

The real problem facing choice advocates has more to do with the public's lack of understanding of governments and markets than it does with how to package choice proposals or what information to provide. We don't yet fully understand the nature and depth of this problem. Support for choice clearly depends upon changing an underlying pro-government perspective that organizes the public's thinking. We need to understand this

pro-government perspective so we can find ways to transform it into a market perspective.

The Public's Pro-Government Perspective

Choice supporters must admit a hard truth — the public doesn't yet believe in vouchers or tax credits let alone separation of school and state. We must also admit that we don't understand much about the pro-government perspective, much less how to change it. We don't know what controls and protects pro-government thinking, what it is about the logic of pro-government thinking that makes market principles incomprehensible.

More importantly, we don't understand how and why some individuals change their pro-government perspective to adopt a market perspective. Did you always believe in market education, or did you begin with some pro-government notions and then change your views over time? If you think it was simply exposure to new facts, programs, and examples, stop and ask yourself about your underlying values. Did something fundamental change regarding your perspective, or did you always understand the logic and power of markets?

Pro-government beliefs form themselves into a self-protective whole; a perspective that is resistant to change in spite of facts or explanations about markets. The pro-government perspective, like any perspective, shapes what people see, think about, decide, value, and advocate about public policy. Here are some recent examples.

A newspaper article reported on the congressional debate over reforming federal education policy. Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle asserted, "We cannot have reform without resources." A letter to the editor about energy deregulation asserted: "So who could ever suggest it should be priced by an open market just like anything else?" Another letter

advocating taxing the wealthy to support affordable housing said, “Opposition to this bill has nothing to do with its effectiveness. The true reason for opposition is simple greed.”

The pro-government perspective controls the thought of these people, the facts they observe, and the assumptions that they make — if there is a problem, government should correct it; social problems exist for lack of money for government remediation; some goods and services are privileged and can’t be provided through the market; and so on.

On the other side of the debate, a free market perspective carries different assumptions—free markets create opportunity for everyone, the individual is fundamentally responsible for self, free markets create a diversity of goods and services, market exchanges produce increasing efficiencies, and so on. The two perspectives talk different languages, use different code words, see different facts, reason differently, hold different values, and work for different programs. We all recognize these two perspectives. They form one of the most fundamental divisions between people in our society today.

Those of us trying to change the pro-government, anti-market perspective need to understand this system of thought just as physicians understand various systems of the body, scientists understand physical and biologic systems, and mathematicians understand math systems. The understanding of systems allows a scientist to explain them and how they arise, and it allows practitioners to change them. Yet surprisingly, there is very little good literature that describes and explains how the pro-government perspective operates or arises in people’s thinking.

The pro-government perspective is the problem because it is so compelling that it grips and holds much of the public’s thinking. Unless we discover why this is so and how this

perspective evolves into pro-market thinking, the pro-government public will continue to reject our positions, distort our facts, and trounce our initiatives.

Perspectives at Work

Let’s look at three examples of how perspectives grip and control thought. The first comes from history; the second from our current educational research; and the third from the perspective many school choice supporters have but many opponents lack.

1. The Aristotelian Perspective

Aristotle’s science of falling bodies persisted for 2,000 years, even though scholars contested it with facts some 400 years before Newtonian science finally replaced it. Even the classic experiment of dropping different weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa was conducted much earlier but ignored and then misattributed to Galileo. While the experimental facts showed that bodies of different weights fell at the same velocities, the Aristotelian scientific perspective

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was so powerful that these findings were ignored, distorted or rejected as the old perspective protected itself from change. This denial of fact and logic by Aristotelian mechanics forms a famous chapter from the history of science. It is only one of many demonstrations of the gripping power a scientific perspective, even a faulty one, can hold over thought.

2. The Child’s Perspective of weight

Even for individual concepts, we can see a gripping power at work that shapes the facts observed and the reasoning used. In experiments

famous to educators, psychologists showed how students under the age of seven thought the weight of a clay ball changed when it is rolled out.³ Young students' 'perspective' of weight convinced them that because the clay was now longer, it must weigh more.

When the researchers continued to roll the clay out, astonishingly some of these same youngsters suddenly changed their minds and asserted the weight was now less. When asked why, they said because it is now thin. Teaching, demonstrations, weighing the objects, nothing worked to change their mind. They *knew* as a fact that they observed that the two objects were a little bit different in weight.

Yet months later, they reasoned and saw things differently. Now they *knew* as a matter of logical necessity that the two clay shapes weighed the same regardless of changes in length and thickness. The two balls *had* to be the same because nothing was added or taken away. The students' perspective at first distorted and misperceived facts, but then the development of a more advanced perspective allowed the students to use a different logic and to see different facts in the same experiment.

3. The Perspective of Profit

Conduct this inquiry. Ask the typical adult if the profit motive has any place in education. You're likely to get a resounding, "No!" Then try any manner of facts or examples of for-profit companies providing quality education and see if you have persuaded the person. The pro-government perspective will not let the adult understand that both sides benefit in an economic exchange. Just as young children can't observe that the weight hasn't changed in a flattened ball of clay, many adults can't comprehend that both buyer and seller gain value when they enter into a voluntary exchange.

But the logic of the pro-market perspective makes an adult see that a buyer values the good or service received more than

the money spent, and that the seller values the money received more than the good or service delivered. The logic of market principles compels us to make these observations, but for those with a pro-government perspective, it makes no sense.

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In this example profit is what psychologists call a centration. Just as the child centers only on the clay's length to perceive a change in its weight, adults may center on the producer's profit to perceive a loss for the consumer. Centrated thought lacks a larger system of reasoning that groups several factors together in order to organize its mental operations. As a result, thought is centered on isolated elements without the necessary relationships among the elements. The relationship of a two-way mutually beneficial exchange is but one of several market and system concepts that seem to be missing from the thinking of many. School choice supporters need to understand both why this is the case and how these concepts develop in people.

When a Perspective is Important

As we said, people can use and benefit from markets without understanding them. However, compare the reform of public utilities and government franchised industries with reform of public schools. No basic change in the public's understanding of system arrangements was required for the deregulation of telecommunications, airlines, trucking, energy, etc. The basic structural relationship between consumer and provider within those markets remained constant under deregulation—consumers still paid the provider for their services. From the public's point of view, consumers were simply given more choices,

basically a good idea. The providers were already economically tied to their customers, and deregulation did not upset the thinking of the general public. No change in perspective was necessary.

School reform, however requires changing the basic consumer/provider relationship. In our system of public education, consumers don't pay for services received, the public does. Families are not really customers. Society purchases educational services on behalf of families using a system of democratically run government schools.

For the public to accept market principles in education it must understand and accept a new consumer/producer relationship, a huge change given the public's low level of market understanding. The public must abandon its rather thoughtless belief that education is a public good, an individual entitlement, and that it is the public's responsibility to provide education to all children for the common good of society. Within the public's traditional way of thinking (or lack of thinking) about services, market reforms have no place. The pro-government perspective is the public school ideology at work.

Market driven reforms make sense only within the market perspective. Voters realize that vouchers, for example, are not a mere improvement within the box but a fundamental change in the box itself, the very structure of a basic institution. The public seems to sense that vouchers are a basic change and that makes them uneasy; it seems too large, too risky, and possibly hurtful. Advocates underestimate the conceptual change in the public's perspective that real reforms require.

Most previous education reform efforts stay comfortably within the government system box. Take for example the nationally recognized 1983 report on the state of American education, *A Nation at Risk*.⁴ Neither its findings nor the recommendations addressed in any way the failures of central planning, monopolies,

government as a method of service delivery, third party funding, lack of consumer voice or choice, or any other system aspects of government versus market systems of delivery. The report took the system itself for granted and only attempted improvements in the performance properties of the system—content, standards, teaching, leadership, fiscal support, etc.

However, school choice is not another program improvement. It's a systemic change, and it requires a huge change in the perspective that takes a government delivery system for granted.

The Think Tank Role

Choice advocates can continue to hammer away with think tank papers and media campaigns, oblivious to the nature of the pro-government

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perspective, or we can turn to research and development in an attempt to first understand the perspective and then to change it. This R&D is a natural function of think tanks. The very heart of the free-market think tank mission — to work toward a free society — brings with it two tasks. First, think tanks must be expert in markets and government systems. Second, as society's teachers, think tanks must also be expert in understanding and changing the public's thinking and misconceptions. These tasks form two quite different challenges.

As teachers we must not ignore the learner's current level of understanding and ability to grasp complex concepts. We cannot teach algebra to young children who have yet to understand the whole number system. Likewise, market teachers must understand how market understanding develops out of elementary

concepts of producers and consumers to the more advanced explanations of self-regulating, self-elaborating systems of exchange.

As teachers of school choice, our job is not simply a matter of presenting new facts or the history of government schooling. It is the public's pro-government perspective itself that stands in the way of understanding the facts and explanations of how markets would work in education. The public is rejecting our advanced concepts because the pro-government perspective is compelling; it grips thinking and shapes what is seen as fact; it shapes the values and organizes the policy choices in educational systems. The public makes the wrong choices, from our point of view, because it cannot fit market understanding into its pro-government perspective of how the world works.

What Should We Settle For?

We don't yet understand how to change the current pro-government perspective to a free market perspective. But we have clues, we have seen it happen in individuals, and we know how to study the problem and work toward a solution. If fact, there will likely be more than one optimal solution. And we can all contribute something to the effort.

Without a shift in the public's perspective, we may have to settle for the limited successes that Moe's recent work suggests.⁵ Yet years ago Chubb and Moe told us that the intellectual debate about school choice was over. We won. But for the public, the policy debate is far from over.

When we understand how the public's perception of government and markets develops, we will be in a far better position to win the

policy debates. Then no teacher union money or old political rhetoric will stop the evolution to a market education system.

ENDNOTES

¹ Terry Moe found that information didn't make much difference in people's evaluation of vouchers. On p.228 of his new book, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2001), he says, "As a result, the impact of information on support for vouchers may be positive, or it may be negative, depending on how these other variables come into play." What he is saying is that there is an underlying "structure of thinking" (pp. 227,234, 253), a "genuine substance" (pp. 350, 358), "surprisingly effective at linking these things together" (p. 244),

² Andrew Coulson, *Market Education: the Unknown History* (New Brunswick: Social Philosophy and Policy Center and Transaction Publishers, 1999) pp. 293-306.

³ Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *Child's Construction of Quantities*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Basic Books, 1974) p. 22-46. This experiment is one of a series. These were not intended to simply describe these amusing misconceptions of students in their early stages of development, but to uncover the cognitive systems that organize and produce them.

⁴ *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was guided by the 18-member national Commission on Excellence chaired by David Gardner, President of the University of Utah. The Commission, appointed by Secretary of Education T.H. Bell, released its report in April of 1983 after 18 months of work. Its report was based on commissioned papers and testimony from professional groups, parents, public officials, and scholars.

⁵ Moe (*Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*) uses a variable he terms "the public school ideology" to measure the effect of this perspective on people's positions and views of vouchers.

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