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NEPC Review: Expanding The Education Universe: A Fifty-State Strategy for Course Choice

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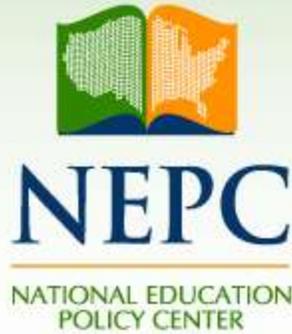
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REVIEW OF *EXPANDING THE EDUCATION UNIVERSE*

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Summary of Review

Based on the presumed success of school choice programs, *Expanding the Education Universe: A Fifty-State Strategy for Course Choice* seeks to take choice a step further. Each student would design a personal program of online and off-line courses chosen from a marketplace of curricula developed by for-profit and not-for-profit vendors, as well as school districts or other public entities. Such course choice would, the report contends, alleviate transportation problems, provide greater options, and circumvent the restricted offerings even in choice schools. The proposal is presented in the form of a “guide” to addressing practical policy issues and implementation problems. However, the report assumes, without solid evidence, that course choice, electronic educational provisions, and the like are viable, effective, and proven methods. No direct research is presented, and relevant related research that might support the efficacy of the method is not included. Accordingly, the piece rests entirely on assumptions and assertions. Given the lack of supporting evidence and detail, policymakers and the public have little basis for assessing the benefits and liabilities of a program that potentially has enormous financial costs and educational quality implications for public education.

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REVIEW OF *EXPANDING THE EDUCATION UNIVERSE: A FIFTY-STATE STRATEGY FOR COURSE CHOICE*

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I. Introduction

*Expanding the Education Universe: A Fifty-State Strategy for Course Choice*¹ proposes the ultimate choice reform for education: individually customized courses flexibly designed and implemented to meet the needs of individual states, districts, and students.

The piece begins with a fairly balanced introduction regarding the limitations of school-based choice (commuting, transportation, viable choice options, peer relations, poor course offerings within a choice school, etc.) and the potential benefits of course choice initiatives in alleviating these concerns. However, the report does not present the case that course choice provides equal or better quality or greater efficiency. Neither does it draw on research in describing the design, funding, or evaluation strategies that it promotes. The implicit expectation is that jurisdictions that adopt the model will see higher quality and a greater diversity of educational options.

Although a version of course choice—online/distance learning—is making headway in higher education, it is a relatively new idea in K-12, with a few statewide examples of elements of the plan. Louisiana’s effort is given prominent play in the report. The course choice agenda follows expectedly from the long-term trends toward more online education, government contracting, and educational choice. It also coincides with the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Under CCSS, most state testing is projected to be conducted online. Under this Course Choice proposal, instruction increasingly moves to the online realm and, as it does, parent choice will reportedly expand more easily and rapidly.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

As noted, the 13-page body of the report simply assumes that school choice is effective and represents sound public and educational policy. Course choice is presented as a logical extension of that model.

In implementation, the report first raises four “tensions” related to who originates the program, who controls, who pays, and “Whose students are these anyway?” (p. 4). The paper then outlines implementation policy decisions that revolve around who is eligible, who provides the content (which it defines quite broadly), who pays, and how much they pay. A section on quality control follows, broken into two parts: who provides the standards (the provider, end-of-course exams, the school, or an outside party) and accountability (market-based, performance-based, and expert review or accreditation). The appendix contains a two-page example of Louisiana’s model and a bibliography. The backbone of the proposal, however, is in the funding and accountability sections.

Funding

Much of the report is devoted to discussing how to re-direct existing state and district funds to pay for the course choice program. This includes:

a) Separate appropriations. In this option, the state uses funds from the state budget while intentionally avoiding the use of general education funds to pay for the program. Essentially, this would involve the state paying twice for a subject offering (the choice option and the traditional option).

b) Funds drawn from the state general education fund. This option shifts how funds will be allocated by the state and introduces a student-level component of school funding. That is, it is a “money follows the child” proposal. Funds from the general education appropriations will be paid directly to the provider by the state. These funds are subsequently subtracted from a district’s allocation of state funds. The author says the districts will object to a reduction in district operating revenue but claims this could also result in more money per remaining FTE student. The reasoning behind this claim is that cyber-courses would cost less than the general per-pupil state aid allocation, and the district would receive the remainder. However, neither the arithmetic nor the political viability of such a notion is addressed.

c) Districts fund courses. This option shifts funding decisions to the district level. Readers are cautioned about “disturbing reports of school-district administrators who intentionally mislead families about course availability in order to protect their bottom line” (p. 3).

After discussing possible funding sources, the report considers how course choice costs could be calculated. The pricing schemes include having a fixed course price, a per-pupil cost proportion, tiered funding, a provider charge (market cost), and simply placing money in an account for parents to draw down and spend at will. Each of these proposals is given a short paragraph, and none are developed in any detail.

Accountability

The three accountability options are grouped under the terms market-based, performance-based, or expert review. The first option is a largely unregulated market, which is expected

to naturally weed out low-quality products via competition and choice. The latter two options suggest a more regulated market. The performance-based model is similar to the current high-stakes testing infrastructure. The expert-review model uses external expertise or, optionally, an accreditation-type review. The author also specifies potential options for addressing student learning: provider-determined, state-determined (via end-of-year exams), school-determined, or expert-reviewed.

The paper ignores the existing evidence on the limits of choice-based reforms and fails to provide evidence for any of its claims.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report is an advocacy piece whose purpose is to advance “course choice.” It employs colorful language, claiming, for example: “For the first time, schools—aided and enriched by outside course providers—can truly be all things (or at least most things) to all of their pupils” (p. 3). It simply assumes that course choice is proven and effective. By limiting its approach to pre-determined implementation decisions, it narrows the reader’s attention and sidesteps the major efficacy, cost, and policy decisions.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The lack of research cited in this paper is troubling, considering that the tone and wording of the paper imply that the suggested expansion of course choice is research-based. For example, the report claims that “course choice enables [students] to learn from the best teachers in the state or nation” (p. 1), but there is no evidence cited to support this claim. Given that the “guide” specifies low-income students and students in high-poverty schools as groups who might be designated as high-priority participants, the reader would expect that supporting research would be presented on this point. It is not.

A review of the literature on the topic of course choice turns up a dearth of existing research to either support or refute the claims made in this report. A primary reason for the lack of research is the newness of the course choice idea in K-12; however, there are other areas in which relevant research findings are applicable. The paper does not reference the rather extensive related literature that includes higher education course choice, Advanced Placement, online course enrollment, and dual credit/dual enrollment programs.² Thus, although the paper “seeks to . . . explain some of the advantages and disadvantages that come with [the options]” (p. 2), it does not meet this goal.

Further, as in the area of course choice generally, there has been very limited empirical inquiry into the effectiveness of electronic courses, and the studies that have been completed have found contradictory or mixed findings.³ The paper provides no evidence or

reference to these or any other studies as to why online curriculum is a superior or preferred alternative to face-to-face learning.

There are additional, complex considerations in course choice that are only briefly mentioned in the paper. Such issues include potential limits on student eligibility; access to courses; range of offerings; standards-based accountability for courses; guidance; the use of consumer evaluation; and accountability funding mechanisms. None of these considerations include references to empirical work, even though there is significant research related to each of them. For example, Ackerman and Gross examine the choice process and “levels of choice” as factors influencing the perceived quality of a course of study.⁴ Such findings question the statement that “parents and kids will naturally want the widest possible range [of courses]” (p. 5). Recent research on the Supplemental Educational Services provision of NCLB, which found that parents primarily wanted to be informed about the “best” option, rather than a wide range of options, provides further challenge to the author’s claim.⁵ In sum, the paper ignores the existing evidence on the limits of choice-based reforms and fails to provide evidence for any of its claims.

Of the 22 references, none are peer reviewed or could be considered as from generally accepted research sources. Instead, they are from advocates, think tanks, and descriptive materials. Eight are from the Louisiana example.

V. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report lacks the empirical evidence and sophisticated discussion necessary for a serious policy proposal. Without such evidence and detail, policymakers have little or no basis for accepting the recommendations in this proposal. Cyber education will undoubtedly play an increasing role in our society. Before accepting such plans as a primary provider of public education, far more sophisticated and rigorous studies must be conducted on the merits and the limitations of such approaches.

Notes and References

- 1 Brickman, M. (2014). *Expanding The Education Universe: A Fifty-State Strategy for Course Choice*. Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved June 12, 2014, from <http://edexcellence.net/publications/expanding-the-education-universe-a-fifty-state-strategy-for-course-choice>.
- 2 For an examination of the effect of high school course-taking on future success, see:
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- 3 See, for example:
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- 4 Ackerman, D.S. & Gross, B.L. (2006). How many choices are good? Measurement of the effects of course choice on perceptions of a marketing option. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 28(1), 69-80.
- 5 Stewart, M.S. (2013). *Design and implementation of an out-of-school choice program: Evidence, opportunities, and limitations in Supplemental Educational Services* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest dissertations and theses database (3594980).

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