

***Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know And What We Need To  
Know About Vouchers And Charter Schools***  
*by Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross  
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*Rhetoric versus Reality* (Washington, DC: Rand, 2001) by Gill and co-authors is the best single volume on vouchers and charter schools available so far. Comprehensive, up-to-date, and clear, it is an extremely useful guide to the current research on privatization of education.

The book is a compendium of evidence on education vouchers and charter schooling. After a short review of the common school movements and the newer choice movement (Chapter 1), the authors set out the relevant ‘empirical issues’. These issues are: academic achievement; choice; access; integration; and civic socialization. These are the salient issues, and the authors confront them all. The authors then nicely distinguish between the advocacy literature and the empirical literature; whereas the former is hortatory and ideologically driven, the latter may be too narrowly focused to inform debates and guide policy. Hence, the usefulness of gathering together the evidence in this single volume.

Chapter 2 describes ‘Vouchers and Charters in Policy and Practice’. However, it is tough to link voucher reform to charter schooling. The former would involve a much more substantial education reform, with implications for parental behaviors, for accountability systems, and for funding mechanisms. Charter schooling can be thought of as an alternative mode of provision, either voucher-funded or funded through the traditional channels. An educational voucher may allow parents to choose a charter school, or instead a private school, or possibly even home-schooling. Conflating these two reforms may confuse some readers; probably by adding to the mystique around charter schooling, which is a reasonable straightforward change to how government contracts for provision, without clarifying the complications in voucher reform. Empirical investigations have not interlinked vouchers and charters, so the presentation could easily have been divided. As well, the contrast between vouchers and charters is probably more illuminating than the comparison.

The next five Chapters cover each of the empirical issues in a systematic fashion. Beginning with the theoretical arguments, the book then turns directly to the evidence for each issue.

On vouchers and academic achievement the book relies primarily on the experimental evidence, but also includes discussion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program as well programs in Cleveland and Florida. On charters and academic achievement, the evidence is mainly from three states – Michigan, Arizona, and Texas. To summarize: although mostly inconclusive, there may be some gains to academic achievement from vouchers.

On choice, on access, and on integration, the book separates out ideas that have often been considered together. On choice, the authors focus on three important ideas: the demand for choice, the ‘supply of choice’, and parental satisfaction. This discussion goes beyond simple libertarian calls for more choice, and inquires into the constraints on the supply of choice. On access, the authors investigate who has the opportunity to enroll, particularly across income groups. Finally, on integration, the authors focus specifically on the effects of vouchers and charter schools on the racial composition of districts and schools.

On civic socialization, the authors recognize the main problems, namely, what is civic socialization and how should it be measured? The authors define it as civic knowledge, attitudes, and behavior; but these attributes are immediately contested when specified (e.g. the notoriety of a standard curriculum). An alternative definition – used by economists – may help, i.e. civic socialization improves our efficiency at producing public goods and collective action. On

measurement, school children are likely to give socially desirable responses to questions about their attitudes.

The final Chapter assesses the challenges, particularly what is not known about these reforms. Importantly, the authors note 'cost' as a missing criterion. Bluntly, almost none of the evidence and the debate has addressed the cost-effectiveness of vouchers and charter schools: can we afford to introduce vouchers or charters? If *Rhetoric versus Reality* at least brings this question into sharp relief, the authors' conscientious and dispassionate assembling of the evidence will have been worthwhile.

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