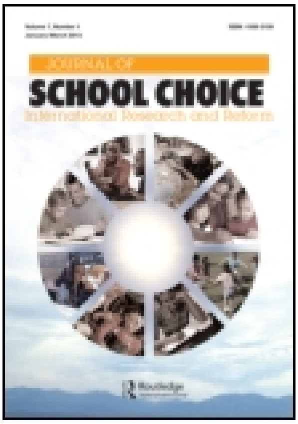

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Chasing Rainbows: A Comment on School Choice and the National Football League

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RESPONSE

Chasing Rainbows: A Comment on School Choice and the National Football League

We are pleased to see our article, "Rethinking the Market Metaphor: School Choice, the Common Good, and the National Football League," appear in the *Journal of School Choice* (Beal & Olson Beal, this issue). We are also pleased that the journal's editor (John Merrifield, Professor of Economics at The University of Texas at San Antonio), a member of the journal's editorial board (Joseph Viteritti, the Thomas Hunter Professor of Public Policy and Chair of the Urban Affairs & Planning Department at Hunter College) and several other individuals (Joseph L. Bast, President and CEO of The Heartland Institute; Andrew Coulson, Director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute; Eric A. Houck, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill) have commented on our article (see Merrifield, this issue; Viteritti, this issue; Bast, this issue; Coulson, this issue; Houck, this issue).

Comment-and-response dialogues can prompt participants to reexamine their assumptions, consider alternative viewpoints, and more carefully articulate their positions. They can also easily devolve into tiresome and ineffectual exercises in which participants waste considerable energy calling each other names, talking past each other, and defending their own intellectual territory. We hope to steer this dialogue in a positive direction by starting with a brief discussion of rainbows.

CHASING RAINBOWS

For present purposes, a rainbow is a metaphor for social objectives that could, at least in theory, be realized, although their pursuit may be heroically optimistic, implausible, or even quixotic. Chasing rainbows can be a worthwhile endeavor, but it can also evolve into a kind of ideology that manifests itself as unreflective commitment to underlying assumptions and value attributions. As should be apparent (particularly in the comments by Coulson and Bast), there is more going on in this forum than quibbling over how different economic theories should be applied and/or interpreted.

We want to be upfront about the rainbow we're chasing. We want public schools that reflect the communities they serve in terms of student ability, race, ethnicity, native language, socioeconomic status, and religion. We do not want the quality of education (including teacher quality, physical facilities, resources, and extracurricular activities, etc.) to be dependent on parents' willingness or ability to pay.

We are deeply skeptical of the capacity of economic markets to deliver the kind of public schools we envision. This skepticism is rooted in both professional and life experience. Brent has taught corporate strategy for nearly 20 years to both undergraduate and MBA students. Heather spent several years conducting research as a doctoral student in a low-income urban elementary school in a highly competitive school choice market context (Olson Beal, 2008) and has spent the last 5 years as a professor of teacher education in a rural east Texas town that shares—much to our surprise—many of the same troubling issues that were present in the aforementioned urban area (e.g., unequal distribution of school resources, White and higher-income flight, unequal access to "choice" schools, barriers to entry, etc.).

Our ideological stance was further shaped by our personal experiences navigating what we characterize as the biggest school choice experiment in the United States—the East Baton Rouge Parish (EBRP) public school system—with our three children. During our time there (2000–2008), different schooling options included secular private schools, religious-based private schools, charter schools, traditional public schools (based on neighborhood attendance zones), a public magnet system, suburban and bedroom-community public schools, and homeschooling.

Although many EBRP parents have historically chosen parochial over public education, EBRP's school choice experiment began in earnest in May of 1981 when Federal District Court Judge John Parker imposed a desegregation plan that involved court-ordered busing in an effort to achieve more racially balanced school populations. After more than 30 years of school "choice," the "marketplace" for education in Baton Rouge is now segmented into two schooling systems: 83% of EBRP public school students are Black, while White students make up more than 80% of the EBRP private school population. Twenty-nine percent of all school-aged children in EBRP now attend private schools—significantly more than the national average of 11% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

In terms of academic achievement, this dual system has not served the community well. In 2012, Louisiana ranked 41st out of 51 states (including the District of Columbia) for its average ACT composite score (20.3) (ACT, 2012). In 2011, Louisiana public school fourth graders ranked 48th in reading and 50th in mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress; eighth graders ranked 50th in reading and 48th in math. In 2012, EBRP ranked 55th out of 71 districts in the state. Although there are a number of good private schools in EBRP, considered collectively, K–12 education in

Baton Rouge is a story of haves and have-nots. It is a system that expands choice for some parents while limiting it for others (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). Given what we know about economic markets, it's a familiar and predictable outcome.

We don't want schools to be the equivalent of shopping malls, with some kids free to roam Nordstrom with their parents' credit cards while other kids are consigned to work in the food court (if they're lucky). We know what markets are capable of and, in some contexts, we're happy with the results. When it comes to K–12 education, though, we just don't want what markets are selling (no pun intended).

We have put our ideology on the table. Now we briefly address each comment. We start with Viteritti and Houck, then move to Coulson, then Bast, and finally, Merrifield.

VITERITTI

Viteritti describes the NFL as large men in tights chasing a bullet-shaped ball. Described this way, we too find it esthetically "disconcerting." As Viteritti acknowledges, the NFL is a relatively unique organization that successfully balances the individual and collective interests of a diverse set of stakeholders (i.e., players, communities, teams, team owners, the league, etc.). If the NFL can manage individual interests in such a way that collective interests are effectively achieved (and can do so in an environment in which unconstrained individual choice is incompatible with collective interests), then why can't public schools?

According to Viteritti, we have written one of the best critiques of the market metaphor he's seen. Although we are understandably reluctant to challenge Viteritti's assessment, Brent is hesitant to wholeheartedly accept his advice to "let go of the idea that education is about competition" (while Heather is perfectly happy to do so) (Viteritti, this issue, p. 506). We understand and applaud Viteritti's comments about cooperation, but wonder if in certain cases, competition isn't itself a form of cooperation? Viteritti states that he would like to see school choice used to open up new opportunities for disadvantaged children. Although we would certainly like to see choice utilized as a redistributive policy, we would also like to see it leveraged to increase schooling options, system responsiveness, and dynamism. We assert that the careful management of individual choice within the K–12 education system may be one of the keys to realizing these objectives.

HOUCK

We agree with Houck that metaphors are powerful and have the potential to alter one's perceptions. The pervasiveness of the market metaphor is precisely why it needs to be critically assessed. With respect to our NFL metaphor, Houck suggests that instead of focusing on parental choice, we should ask ourselves which components of each system (K–12 education and the NFL) are responsible for the greatest value added. “In each case,” according to Houck, “the greatest value is added at the point of performance, making both players and teachers the single most important component of their respective systems” (this issue, p. 518). A comparison of how each system “understands and values” their human resources, as briefly outlined by Houck, strikes us as a provocative and potentially fruitful extension of the metaphor (and we wish we’d thought of it). We agree that we need to devote more resources to ongoing professional development for preservice and in-service teachers. A focus on identifying, developing, and rewarding good teaching meshes well with Viteritti’s suggestion that we move from a preoccupation with competition to a more explicit focus on education as a cooperative endeavor.

COULSON

Coulson chides us for relying on “guesswork” instead of addressing the “considerable” empirical work that has already been done on education markets—research that he has previously reviewed and summarized in this journal in a 2009 article entitled “Comparing Public, Private, and Market Schools: The International Evidence” (Coulson, 2009). We have carefully reviewed this article. Despite Coulson’s bravado (e.g., in the article’s abstract, he states: “Given the breadth, consistency, relevance, and decisiveness of this body of evidence, the implications for U.S. education policy are significant” [2009, p. 31]), we find his arguments unpersuasive for two reasons.

First, Coulson’s article has at least three significant methodological deficiencies: a vote count meta-analytic approach, a majority of nonpeer-reviewed sources, and the conflation of “nongovernment” and “free market.” A simplistic vote-count approach has a number of well-known deficiencies, including problems distinguishing positive and negative votes, and no way to account for effect size, significance level, or sample size in individual studies (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009; Cooper, 2010).

Less than one third (21 out of 65) in Coulson’s meta-analysis are from peer-reviewed journals. Although Coulson does his best to deflect this concern in the article itself (see Coulson, 2009, p. 41), there is no comparison between the scrutiny and methodological rigor required of a study published, for example in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and a student master’s thesis, an unpublished working paper from a university in Chile, or a public report (or other similar sources). As Figlio and Stone (1999) observe, “students who attend public and private schools differ in systematic ways" (p. 119). It is essential, therefore, that student sorting and sector selection be adequately addressed; doing so often requires sophisticated statistical modeling beyond the inclusion of control variables.

For example, in Kingdon and Teal (2007), comparison of unadjusted to adjusted mean achievement advantages suggests that 82% of the advantage of private schools over public schools is due to differences in student characteristics (p. 73). In another study involving approximately 50,000 students across ten different Latin American countries, the initially promising effect of private school attendance disappears once student and peer group characteristics are accounted for (Somers, McEwan, & Willms, 2004). It is highly unlikely that unpublished work—master's theses, working papers, reports, etc.—match the statistical rigor of work that appears in peer-reviewed journals (particularly well-respected journals).

As a quick test of our assertion that peer-reviewed journal articles are more likely to adequately account for sorting and sector selection issues (and therefore less likely to show a private school advantage), we prepared a table (available upon request) that briefly summarizes the 21 peer-reviewed studies that Coulson includes in his meta-analysis. We categorized each of these studies as either P (positive), M (mixed, with some results favoring private schools and other favoring public schools), and N (for neutral results). In contrast to Coulson's "overwhelming" results, only 10 of the 21 studies yield positive results for private schools (another nine are mixed, and two are neutral).

Finally, Coulson conflates nongovernment schools with "free-market" schools. In the majority of the studies, schools that outperform "government" schools were not for-profit (as the term "free-market" suggests), but religious and other public/private hybrids (e.g., subsidized "private" schools, etc.). For example, five of the 21 peer-reviewed studies involve Catholic schools. As Evans and Schwab (1995) remark:

> In some ways, Catholic schools are like other private schools—they must meet the test of the market. But in other ways they are obviously fundamentally different, and it is not clear that they succeed because of the importance of religion or the discipline of competition. (p. 972)

Second, in addition to these methodological deficiencies, there is a more fundamental problem with Coulson's meta-analysis (and the conclusions he reaches). We illustrate this problem with a simple thought experiment:

Imagine a community that decides to pool its resources and build public libraries in all of its residential neighborhoods. In a few affluent neighborhoods, however, groups of local residents (and a few entrepreneurs) build private libraries that charge users for access. In these neighborhoods, therefore, there are parallel library systems, one under collective (or "government" control), and one governed by the "market mechanism." If you were a *researcher tasked with evaluating these competing library systems, how would you do it?*

As Wolf (1988) observes, in his book entitled *Markets or Government: Choosing Between Imperfect Alternatives*, "the problem would be easier if the choice were between perfect markets and imperfect governments, or between perfect governments and imperfect markets. . . . the actual choice is some compromise between imperfect markets and imperfect governments" (p. 11). The challenge in this case is to compare the social value created under different governance mechanisms (i.e., government or market) by subtracting the value of all inputs into each respective system from the total value created by each system for all stakeholders, including users, employees, and the broader community. In practice, this is a devilishly difficult exercise.

In the case of competing library systems, demonstrating that private libraries are superior to public libraries with respect to a particular performance variable may not be sufficient to determine which governance system (public or private) creates more value. For example, if providing access to low-income patrons creates more value than providing the same access to high-income patrons, then comparing the number of books loaned in a given time period by the different library systems represents only part of the picture. It would also be necessary to determine if public and private libraries served patrons in different income brackets. For example, if the public library system loaned fewer books, but those books were loaned primarily to lower-income patrons, then more social value might have been created by the public system even though the private system may have been more "efficient" in terms of the number of books loaned. By analogy, in the case of K–12 education, if more value is created by raising the test scores of disadvantaged students, then raising these students' scores may—even if it requires more resources—create more value than raising the scores of other students.

In nearly every study cited by Coulson, private schools are populated with students from higher socioeconomic classes. This statement from Goldhaber (1996) is representative:

> Not surprising is the finding that families with more education, who have higher incomes, who set aside more money for their children's education and have more educational resources in the home, are more likely to send their children to private schools. (pp. 99, 101)

Given that public and private schools deal with different student populations, unless the larger question of social value is considered, the question of which governance mechanism (i.e., government or the market) creates the most value cannot be adequately addressed. The "efficiency" questions that drive the studies in Coulson's meta-analysis are useless unless coupled with a discussion of effectiveness as determined by relative social value.

BAST

Bast leads with the assertion that the United States engaged in a 200-year (from approximately 1635 to 1835) "experiment in privatization" that was "highly successful" (this issue, p. 508). Formal schooling during this time period in the South did not exist (Johnson, Musial, Hall, & Gollnick, 2014). The children of the wealthy were educated by private tutors. Others, if they were lucky, received rudimentary instruction from their parents. A large percentage of children were apprenticed to craftsmen at a fairly young age. Obviously, there was no formal education for the children of enslaved people. In the Middle Colonies, education was a mixed bag, generally provided in an uneven and decentralized manner, often through religious institutions. In the North, different levels of government were integral to the provision of education from the outset (i.e., the Boston Latin School, opened in 1635, was town supported). In Massachusetts, the Old Deluder Satan Act, passed in 1647, required towns with at least 50 households to build schools. The history of K–12 education during this time period is replete with "government" involvement in the form of laws (e.g., The Land Ordinance of 1785), taxes, and subsidies (Johnson et al., 2014; Kauchak & Eggen, 2014). Although literacy studies based on the examination of estate documents—a data source that oversamples older adults, males, and the wealthy—seem to support the idea of an educated populace, other studies that focus on the general population reveal a different picture. For example, a study of literacy based on name-signing ability using Rhode Island town records during this time period found that while 77.1% of White males were literate, only 28.5% of White females, 20.8% of non-White males, and 6.3% of non-White females could sign their own names (Herndon, 1996).

The rest of Bast's comment is equally perplexing (see Table 1). Apparently, externalities are "insufficient justification for government intervention" (this issue, p. 509) (despite the fact that externalities are often the primary justification for government intervention; see the debate between Arthur Pigou and the Chicago School, for example, or the work of Ronald Coase), market failure is not a concern (an assertion that will come as a surprise to industrial organization economists, public sector economists, those involved in public policy, and everyone that has, at one time or another, been on the receiving end of different kinds of market failure), voucher programs should not be complicated by "'regulatory and/or bureaucratic interventions'" (this issue, p. 510) (even though voucher programs are themselves, ironically, a form of "bureaucratic intervention"), information asymmetries are not a problem (because, according to Bast, we're able to purchase pencils, even though pencils have nothing to do with why Akerlof and Stiglitz won the 2001 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for their research on asymmetric information), and the NFL, as a sports franchise, has managed to cajole taxpayers into paying for its stadiums (which is true, but doesn't have anything to do with our article).

TABLE 1 Summary of Bast's Main Points

Assertion	Representative Quote
200 year experiment in schooling privatization early in the history of the United States was "highly successful."	"For nearly 200 years, colonies and then state governments relied on private institutions to finance and operate schools with far less interference and taxpayer support than is common today" (this issue, p. 508).
The presence of externalities in K–12 education should not shape public policy.	"They believe this may make education a poor fit for market delivery because markets undersupply such goods. But positive (and negative) externalities are ubiquitous and therefore are insufficient justification for government intervention" (this issue, p. 509).
The possibility that markets for K–12 education would fail to deliver efficient outcomes is not a legitimate concern.	"Although Beal and Olson Beal cite the work of William Baumol on contestable markets, it is unlikely they read or understand it. It would be tedious to go through all six 'market assumptions' in their Table 1, but they all manifest misunderstandings of economic methodology and how markets actually work. Herbert Walberg and I addressed many of these concerns in our work a decade ago . . ." (this issue, p. 510).
Voucher programs do not require significant regulatory or bureaucratic controls to mitigate market deficiencies.	"Actually, the regulatory and bureaucratic interventions that voucher proponents are likely to endorse arise from political calculations rather than economic considerations. Economics tells us voucher plans can and probably should be quite simple: All parents and guardians and schools should be eligible to participate, voucher amounts should be determined by taxpayers, and reporting requirements should be the lowest necessary to prevent fraud. Any policies and rules beyond that aren't needed to 'compensate for anticipated market deficiencies' but are added only to overcome misconceptions and fears fanned by interest groups and ideologues opposed to expanding parental choice" (this issue, p. 510).
Information asymmetries are not a problem in education markets.	"Information asymmetry, like externalities and competition, is another ubiquitous feature of our lives. None of us knows enough to make even simple things such as pencils . . . so how are we to keep pencil suppliers from taking advantage of us?" (this issue, p. 510).
K–12 schooling is already a market, and economic theory (and the market metaphor, by implication) is both appropriate and useful.	"A number of retorts could be made but really only one is necessary: *schooling is not merely like a market, it is a market*. Schools are many things—community centers, a way to pass along a culture, an exercise in local democracy, a goal-setting process—but there is no question that parents, teachers, administrators, and school board members engage in a series of exchanges under constraints caused by scarcity, the very definition of a market" (this issue, p. 511, emphasis in original).
The study of clubs and churches may offer some insights into K–12 reform efforts.	"I believe looking at schools as if they were clubs is a useful exercise, and I hope these authors follow this line of research, because they will see that economics is the study of human action in pursuit of a wide range of goals, not merely profit-maximation. Surely there are some lessons here for reorganizing K–12 education" (this issue, p. 512).
The NFL has a dark side.	"The policies and agreements that distinguish an NFL franchise from other businesses enable them to blackmail fans with threats of leaving them for another city that offers more taxpayer subsidies. The organization of the NFL makes it more difficult for sports fans, their customers, to hold them accountable for delivering a quality service" (this issue, pp. 512–513).

Bast's blind faith in the market mechanism strikes us as both uninformed and naïve. What Bast fails to appreciate is that corporations intentionally and systematically exploit market failures. Companies not only know what externalities are, they build their business models around them. They are aware of network effects, the role of technological standards, and how to systematically exploit them. They understand asymmetric information and actively work to use it to their advantage. If K–12 education were a legitimate market, the market deficiencies identified in Table 1 of our article would serve as an anatomical map of pressure points and weaknesses that for-profit providers would systematically exploit (Baye, 2009; Besanko, Dranove, Shanley, & Schaefer, 2010; Grant, 2010; Hill & Jones, 2008).

We take some solace in the fact that when Bast uses words like "privatization" or "market," he may not really mean "privatization" or "market." For example, Bast defines a market as "a series of exchanges under constraints caused by scarcity" (this issue, p. 511). By that definition, barter arrangements would qualify as "markets," as would the economies of the former Soviet Union and present-day Cuba. When economists talk about markets, they generally refer to structured exchanges driven by individual self-interest that are characterized by a lack of central coordination and involve mutual adjustment among participants (Beal, 2012; Lindblom, 2001). This is the same definition that Merrifield (2009) employs when he argues in an article entitled "Imagined Evidence and False Imperatives" that most school choice programs "lack most or all of the key elements of market systems, including profit, price change, market entry, and product differentiation" (p. 55). If what Bast means by a "market" is a publicly-funded voucher system, then, despite ideological differences, our positions might be closer in practice than it appears.

Dialogue is only useful in situations in which participants can agree on a common reality against which to test their respective assertions. In Bast's case, we're not sure this is possible. One possible exception might be his suggestion that the economic literature on private clubs might be usefully applied to K–12 education. This seems like an interesting assertion (and we may take him up on it at some point). Bast may find that this line of inquiry is a two-edged sword, however, given that private clubs have been repositories of fossilized racism (e.g., Whites-only country clubs are still common)—something that our public schools should not emulate.

MERRIFIELD

Merrifield encapsulates a number of important issues from our article in the form of questions. He asks if markets for K–12 education are likely, because of problems with market failure, to produce outcomes that are "inferior to those that could result from political-administrative control of production?" He asks whether we are "willing to ban private spending on supplemental instruction, or public–private shared financing of schooling because the private component is unaffordable to some?" (Merrifield, this issue, p. 500). He wonders whether there are specific ways to address the shortcomings of political control that would produce outcomes that would be better than plausible, imperfect market outcomes. These are good questions—and we agree that they have the potential to help fill the *Journal of School Choice* for years to come.

We believe that this dialogue needs to address the potential of K–12 education in the United States to counterbalance growing income and wealth inequality. We disagree with Merrifield's characterization of this problem as a failure to differentiate between statistical groups and individuals. As several recent studies have highlighted, "the distribution of wage and salary earnings in the United States widened dramatically from the late 1970s through 2000, producing levels of economic inequality not seen since the Great Depression" (Hanley, 2010). In addition to wage and salary disparities, social mobility—defined as the ability of individuals to move along the wage and wealth continuum—has declined (DeParle, 2012). Finally, the concentration of wealth has increased (Weissmann, 2013). Inequality and declining social mobility have negative societal consequences (Wilkinson, 2006). We believe that K–12 education is one of a small number of social institutions that could be effectively leveraged to reverse (or at least arrest) these trends.

There are a few ways to sharpen this dialogue. First, we need to agree on what the term "market" means. In many circles, the socialization of costs through a voucher system is enough to disqualify K–12 education from being classified as a legitimate market. This is one of the dangers of the market metaphor. If school choice advocates throw around the word "market," they should not be surprised when folks believe that they're talking about "real" markets (instead of voucher-based quasi- or pseudo-markets that retain public funding, access guarantees, and other regulatory controls not found in other market settings). Another problem we see (to which we alluded in our response to Coulson) is an unhealthy (and inaccurate) propensity to treat governance options as dichotomous (e.g., as either government or market). There is a lot of interesting and potentially valuable ground between these two extremes. Finally, we believe that it is essential to shift the discussion from a focus on specific outcomes (e.g., test scores, other measures of student achievement) to a discussion of economic and social value (see our response to Coulson).

We hope to participate in this dialogue going forward.

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