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A Response to John Covaleskie

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Abstract: I have no doubt that Covaleskie's commentary was well- intentioned. Nonetheless, it is seriously flawed. In this response I shall identify the numerous instances of inaccurate and incomplete data, as well as invalid reasoning, upon which his conclusion is based.

1. The State of Public Schooling

Citing Berliner and Bracy, Covaleskie claims that public schools are not failing and so are not in need of systemic reform. The two authors draw primarily from the same sources, so it is sufficient to focus on the work of Berliner. His principal arguments are discussed below.

1.1 *Indicators of National Educational Performance*

1.1.1 *The SAT*

The SAT-taking population has become increasingly diverse over time. Based on this observation, it is argued that the sole cause of the decline in overall average scores has been the participation of increasing numbers of lower- scoring students. Berliner offers as evidence a table of average SAT scores by ethnic group, for the years 1975 and 1990. There are three fatal flaws with his argument: the historical SAT scores he cites are incorrect, SAT scores have declined dramatically at the top as well as on average, and most of the decline in SAT scores took place prior to 1975.

To show that the average SAT score has been lowered solely by an increase in the number of non-White test- takers, it is necessary to demonstrate that the scores of Whites were constant or

improving during the given period. Berliner's table does just that, revealing a gain in the mean SAT score of Whites from 930 in 1975 to 945 in 1990 [1]. These scores are not accurate. The mean White SAT score actually fell from 944 in 1975-76 to 930 in 1990-91 (U.S. Department of Education (1), 1993, p.126). None of the other SAT scores in Berliner's table are accurate either. His figure for the 1990 average score of Mexican- Americans is fully 26 points higher than the true value. It seems that he estimated his numbers from a graph in an unpublished report by Sandia National Laboratories, and it has been suggested that the graph was grossly inaccurate [2]. Whatever the cause of the error, the true data show a decline in the average White score, contradicting Berliner's claim.

Another important fact which cannot be explained by the diversity hypothesis, and which Berliner neglects to mention, is that SAT scores have fallen not only on average but also at the top. More than 112,000 students scored above 600 on the verbal SAT in 1972, but that number had dropped to less than 72,000 by 1990, even though 3,000 more students took the test in that year (U.S. Department of Education (2), 1993, p. 243). In other words the number of top-scoring students decreased by more than a third. This decline is approximately three times larger than the decrease in the proportion of White test-takers (U.S. Department of Education (2), 1993, p. 244), and so only a fraction of it can possibly be accounted for by changing ethnic composition. From the 60's to the `80s, verbal and quantitative SAT scores dropped at top-ranked institutions across the country such as Yale, Princeton, Cal Tech, the University of Chicago, Oberlin, Rice, Brandeis, Carleton, Pomona, Reed, Whitman, and Davidson, to name a few (Sowell, 93, p. 9).

Finally, the ethnicity argument fails to address the most significant period of decline. Between 1966-67 and 1975-76, overall average SAT scores fell by 55 points (U.S. Department of Education (1), 1993, p.126). The first year for which data on the ethnic composition of test-takers are available is 1975-76. To summarize, the ethnicity argument is not only contradicted by the decline in top scorers and in the White average during the period for which the relevant data are available, these data only appear after most of the fall in scores had already taken place.

1.1.2 *The NAEP*

The other national educational barometer given as a sign of public schooling's success is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This series of tests in a variety of subject areas is periodically given to samples of 9, 13 and 17 year-olds. Taken as a whole, the results of these tests have been constant since they began in the 1970s. There are three reasons to consider this a serious problem rather than a sign of success: the SATs indicate that educational performance had already fallen during the 1960's, public school spending has increased dramatically in the past few decades, and knowledge of how to improve academic achievement has been available, yet ignored. Having already discussed SAT scores, let us consider rising costs.

While the NAEPs have on the whole shown no improvement, inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending has tripled since 1959- 60 (U.S. Department of Education (1), 1993, p.52). A rapid rise in costs unaccompanied by gains in quality or output signals gross inefficiency. This inefficiency is manifested in a variety of ways, many of which are described in my paper (Coulson, 1994). The 33 percent drop in average class size that has taken place during this thirty-year period is one example (U.S. Department of Education (1), 1993, p. 74). As explained in my section entitled "Class Size", reductions in the pupil-teacher ratio down to 15 or even 10, have no significant academic benefits. This policy alone is wasting approximately $35 billion dollars a year [3]. Enough to pay for a significant number of educationally effective programs, such as the ones described below.

Tremendous advances have been made in information technology over the past three decades, such as personal computers, electronic databases, and high-speed, high- bandwidth digital networks. These advances alone could reasonably be expected to increase the effectiveness of teachers, were they more widely used. In addition to technological innovations, leaps have been made in educational research as well. The combination of many new primary studies with statistical survey (meta-analysis) techniques, has produced numerous important findings. It is now clear, for instance, that children can learn approximately one third more when they are taught at a speed tailored to their aptitude, than they can in traditional mixed-ability classes (Kulik, 1992). Even more impressively, bright students in enriched and accelerated classes are able to learn between 50 and 100 percent more than they can in regular classrooms (Ibid.). Educational research in peer-tutoring and computer-assisted learning also offer the potential for significant academic gains. Little of this research is applied in public school classrooms. Given the dramatic increases in public school spending, and the failure to effectively apply technology and educational research, the stagnation of NAEP results cannot be seen as a success.

1.2 *International Indicators of Educational Performance*

It is well known that American children perform poorly on international tests. Berliner's answer to this uncomfortable truth is two-fold: the tests might not be fair, and we can't expect to do any better. He fails to make the case for unfairness. His argument is that, on occasion, American children have not yet studied a given topic (e.g. geometry, algebra, etc.) by the same age as their foreign peers, making them unprepared for questions on that topic. If it were only a question of studying topics in a different order from other nations, one would expect that American children would come out about average in the subject of mathematics as a whole. In fact, American children perform near the bottom in mathematics (U.S. Department of Education (1), 1993, p. 414-415). In those cases when American performance is above average, it is usually only for the youngest children; the more time children spend in the system, the more poorly they perform. Nine year-old American children placed third of 10 nations in a 1991 science test, but thirteen year-olds placed 12th out of 14 in the same year (Ibid, p. 417). It can be concluded therefore that either American schooling is less effective in teaching most subjects, or that it is slower in covering them than most other countries. These are both indictments of America's school system.

Berliner's second contention, that American culture is limiting childrens' performance to the current low levels, is also false. As noted in the previous section, there are numerous practices that have been shown to improve academic achievement, but that the public schools have essentially ignored.

1.3 *Efficiency*

According to Childs and Shakeshaft, who reviewed 467 studies of public school cost-effectiveness, the correlation between public school spending and student performance has been low and declining over the past half-century (1986). It has been insignificant (and actually negative) since the 1970's. Similar results have been obtained in meta-analyses by Hanushek (1986 & 1989). Berliner makes no mention of these results in his discussion of the subject. Instead, he describes those who acknowledge the inefficiency of public- schooling as "uninformed taxpayers and politicians" (1993). Indeed virtually none of the evidence of public-schooling's inefficiency is dealt with in Berliner's paper. Rather than repeat all of that evidence here, the interested reader is encouraged to review the "Class Size", "Unproductive Bureaucracy", "Textbooks and their selection", and "Organizational Effectiveness", sections of my paper.

2. Parent Satisfaction With Local Public Schools

Covaleskie's second attempt at establishing the health of public schooling is to observe that most parents are satisfied with their local public schools. Far from being a sign of health, this is one of the most pernicious symptoms of the public school monopoly. In a cross-national study conducted by Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, American parents were found to be the most satisfied with their local schools, while their children had the lowest performance (1992, p. 72). These same parents were nonetheless aware that American children are generally less well educated than their foreign peers. What might account for the fact that parents are better informed about national educational performance than they are about the performance of their local schools? The answer is obvious: while our nation's dismal results on international tests frequently make the headlines, individual schools are rarely subject to such comparisons. The public school system simply does not inform parents of individual school failings.

This information vacuum is caused by the absence of competition. In a competitive market, each enterprise must demonstrate its own strengths and its competitors' weaknesses in order to succeed, so information about the failings of individual businesses is far more efficiently communicated. From automobiles to telephone services, competitors constantly compare themselves by quality and price. Not only do quality and efficiency drop when competition is stifled, but the information flow that would otherwise convey this decline dries up as well. This leaves us with the sad result revealed by Stevenson's experiment, a nation whose children are being poorly educated and whose parents don't even know it. Surely not a sign of health.

3. Organizational Effects on Human Action

Covaleskie spends a great deal of time criticizing the view that human beings are strictly concerned with their own short term gratification. This criticism is beside the point. The theory of human action I have presented, that human beings pursue what they value, embraces the idea that the well-being of others can have a powerful effect on ourselves and our actions. Clearly most people value the health and happiness of their loved ones, and even of strangers. The real issue is how our actions are affected by the incentive structures of different organizations. Compare a situation in which actions that benefit others are injurious to us, versus one in which those same actions benefit us as well. In which of these two situations are people more likely to pursue the actions that benefit others?

To take a concrete example, let us turn to the issue of class size. The statistical evidence shows that smaller pupil/teacher ratios, unless they reach impossibly low levels, are of no significant benefit to student performance (Odden, 1990). Despite this fact, and despite the fact that there are many more educationally effective and less costly practices, the public school system roundly favors class size reduction. Research shows that smaller classes increase teacher morale and reduce teacher workload. Because public school teachers are not rewarded for better teaching--their working conditions and salaries depend on seniority not performance--they personally lose out if they advocate alternatives to reduced class size. That is to say, they face lower morale and larger workloads, with no systemic compensation for the loss. The implication here is not that teachers, any more than other individuals, respond immediately and uniformly to the systemic incentives of their workplace, but simply that these incentives exist and necessarily exert some influence on their decision-making.

Compare this incentive structure to that of a free and competitive market. In such a system, the success of a school would depend on its ability to demonstrate the greatest gains for its clientele. With this success would come higher teacher salaries and better working conditions. Thus, while

public sector teachers have to suffer in order to adopt more educationally effective practices in this situation, teachers in the for-profit sector would gain from doing so. The question the reader must answer is: Which of these two scenarios is more likely to yield a decision that benefits the students? In answering this question, it should be kept in mind that public schools do in fact support class size reduction, reducing the amount of money that can be spent on academically useful practices. It must also be noted that in other industries the introduction or increase of competition has been shown to increase quality and reduce costs at both the national (Winston, 1993) and the local (Kent, 1987) levels. Finally, the personal value that teaching professionals place on improving their students' performance is constant across these two systems.

Another recurrent theme in Covaleskie's reply is that, because government provision of schooling ostensibly results in "presumptive obligations to improve the conditions of the disadvantaged", it should be preferred to a private system. This argument ignores the fact that a competitive educational market in which poor families are given vouchers, shows just as much concern for their welfare as does the institution of public schooling. The primary change is simply the means of delivery. In fact, such a system would show a far more genuine concern for the welfare of the disadvantaged because it would provide them with a better quality of education than the current system is capable of offering. Public schools have failed the inner city. The problems I have enumerated in my paper are at their severest in districts serving the poor and disenfranchised. The situation has gotten so bad that many of this country's poorest families have been scraping together enough money to pay for private schooling for their children, often when the only private schools available to them are of a different faith. These problems, as I have argued, are not incidental to government provision, they are caused by it. In order to truly improve the education of the poor it is necessary to substitute the demonstrably more effective competitive market for the current bureaucratic monopoly.

4. Competition vs. Monopoly

Covaleskie attempts to refute the benefits of competition by arguing that, while capitalism has lead to higher standards of living than alternative social systems, it does so at the expense of the poorer members of the population. He claims that, "The fact remains that under unregulated capitalism, the rich do get richer and the poor do get poorer". This is false.

While there has never been a completely unregulated capitalist economy, the United States is among the least regulated. Let us take as an example, therefore, the changes in American income distribution over time, adjusted for inflation. The period between 1929 and 1957 is perhaps the earliest for which reliable information is available. In 1929, 41.5 percent of households earned less that $2000 a year (incomes are given in 1950 dollars). In 1957, only 17.3 percent of households earned below that amount. While only 20.6 percent of households were earning more than $4000 in 1929, 54.6 percent were doing so by 1957 (U.S. Bureau of the Census (1), 1975, p. 300). These figures reflect a substantial real increase in earnings at both high and low income levels; much of the population that would have been considered poor joined the ranks of the middle class and the wealthy. Furthermore, this period was not exceptional. Similar gains were enjoyed between 1947 and 1970 (Ibid, p. 290), and they have continued, though far more modestly, from 1970 to the present (U.S. Bureau of the Census (2), 1993, p. 457). This broadly-enjoyed increase in economic welfare is in stark contrast with the fate of former Soviet citizens who suffered under an uncompetitive, centrally planned economy. As the reader is no doubt well aware, that system reduced virtually all its citizens to poverty.

A second economic fallacy presented by Covaleskie is that "there is ongoing competition in capitalism only because of government intervention in the market". In general, the converse is

true. The reduction of government intervention, through deregulation and privatization, has been shown to increase competition, reduce prices, and increase efficiency. Those readers wishing to see the evidence first hand are encouraged to read the works by Kent and Winston already cited, which in turn reference numerous corroborating studies.

The root of Covaleskie's misconception is probably the idea of technical monopoly, in which inherent characteristics of an industry make it difficult or impossible for more than one producer to operate simultaneously. In practice technical monopolies are rare (Friedman, 1982, p. 28), and the conditions for technical monopoly do not exist in the education industry, where entry costs are relatively low and the basic resources (instructional materials) are widely available.

5. Choice

Covaleskie's primary argument against choice is that some parents may chose unwisely. Were there an alternative system peopled by supremely wise and intelligent decision makers who not only knew each child as well as his or her parents, but also sought what was best for each and every child, this argument might have some credence. No such alternative exists. The choice is between fallible parents and fallible civil servants, where parents generally care more about their own children than civil servants care about those of others, and in which the responsibility for raising children belongs to the parents and not to the State. For these reasons the decision must be left to the parents, unless they demonstrate negligence in some recognized way.

Even if Covaleskie were correct in believing that public school employees are somehow wiser and more well- meaning than parents, it would imply a shift towards privatization, not a maintenance of the current government- run system. In all thirteen of the cities studied in a 1984 survey, public school teachers were significantly more likely to send their children to private school than the average parent (Boaz, 1991). In Chicago, the rate was more than double. The flaw in his argument becomes clearer yet when we realize that there is no substantial distinction between educational choices and many other important choices in a child's life. If parents should not be allowed to make the educational decisions for their children, there is no reason to allow them to choose their childrens' diets, religions, or even to make the decision to have children in the first place.

This unfounded advocacy of government rule over educational choices continues in Covaleskie's prediction of scholastic junk-food peddlers. While he expects hordes of individual parents to seek out such shoddy schools, "the polity", composed of none other than these very same individuals, is predicted to "have good reason to not want to invest in this sort of school". There is no magic spell which mysteriously grants heightened intelligence to collective decisions. Majority rule is a tool for compelling conformity when it is necessary for the survival of a society, such as in foreign policy or laws restricting the use of physical force. As I demonstrated in "Human Life, Human Organizations and Education", the coerced conformity of public schooling is not only unnecessary but has actually been inimical to the health of our society.

Conclusion

Covaleskie's commentary fails to address virtually any of the evidence presented in my paper. He ignores the dozens of statistical research studies cited therein, and cavalierly dismisses them as "the anecdotes [I offer] to suggest systemic failure". His few attempts at countering the evidence are based, as I have shown, on false or incomplete information and invalid arguments. My conclusion to this response is therefore identical to the conclusion of my original article:

The same voluntary cooperation and free competition which have raised the standard of living of free countries the world over should be harnessed for the benefit of this country's children. Such a system, when coupled with educational vouchers to assist families with limited means, could provide a higher quality of education for every child, not simply for the wealthy.

Footnotes

1. The SAT data collected by the College Entrance Examination Board, and published by the National Center for Education Statistics, is usually given by scholastic year (e.g. 1975-76) rather than calendar year (e.g. 1975). Berliner, however, uses calendar years for his data. An ambiguity therefore arises as to whether 1975 refers to the 1974-75 or the 1975-76 scholastic year. This ambiguity is resolved by noting that SAT ethnicity breakdowns were not available prior to 1975-76.

2. Berliner cites the third draft of the SNL report as his source. The published version (Carson et al, 1993, p. 274), contains a reasonably accurate graph that diverges sharply from the figures in Berliner's table. Berliner is out of the country as this article goes to press, and unavailable for comment. Gene Glass, editor of EPAA, has suggested in a personal communication that the data presented by Sandia National Laboratories in their third draft was erroneous, and that it was corrected in the published version. Unfortunately, no mention of changes to the data appears in the Preface to that publication.

3. In 1990-91, public school instructional staff numbered 3,051,000. The average salary of instructional staff was $34,410 (U.S. Department of Education (1), 1993, p. 51-52). The total salary cost for instructional staff was therefore approximately $105 billion. If class size had remained constant, the instructional staff would be only two thirds of its present size, for a difference of approximately $35 billion dollars a year.

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