'The Public School Advantage': the numbers add up: book review

Special to The Oregonian By Special to The Oregonian

Follow on Twitter

on February 04, 2014 at 6:00 AM, updated February 04, 2014 at 6:16 AM

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL ADVANTAGE

Christopher A. Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski

University of Chicago Press, $18 paperback

304 pages

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

In 2010, "Waiting for Superman" added momentum to the movement to privatize education. Featuring Geoffrey Canada, the founder of charter schools in Harlem, and Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public school system, the documentary depicted bureaucratization and unions as obstacles to effective teaching and learning in public schools. And it suggested that charter schools -- which offer autonomy, choice, and competition -- are the best hope for America’s children.

Politicians have jumped on the school choice bandwagon. Convinced that public education is in a chronic state of crisis, philanthropic organizations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, have poured millions into market-oriented educational initiatives. Public support for vouchers and charter schools has grown.

The assumption that private schools are better, however, has not gone unchallenged. In "Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools" (2013), Diane Ravitch, the former assistant secretary of education in the administration of George H.W. Bush and our nation's foremost authority on education, blasted the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top federal programs and provided substantial evidence that private schools have not outperformed public schools.

In "The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools," Christopher and Sarah Lubienski, both of whom are professors of education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, add to an emerging scholarly consensus that the free market model isn't the panacea promised by its advocates. Their data-driven argument is a valuable contribution to a vitally important topic.

Focusing on mathematics because, far more than reading and language, it is learned in school, the Lubienskis demonstrate that when the different economic and social characteristics of the school population are accounted for, public school students gained almost a half-year more than their counterparts in Catholic schools. Although Catholic
school teachers believe they have greater freedom in controlling the curriculum and setting pedagogical goals, they seem to hold onto outdated instructional methods. By contrast, public school instructors place more emphasis on geometry, measurement, statistic/probability, and algebra/patterns, the "non-number strands" that are consistent, positive predictors of achievement. And, the Lubienskis point out, burdensome paperwork and links between job security and performance on tests are not related to enhanced student achievement.

The work of Ravitch and the Lubienskis should force us to re-visit the recent claims about public and private schools. The idea of choice does square with American values. And the proposition that autonomy and competition will produce better results does seem eminently logical. Evidence, however, should not be ignored – or explained away. As the Lubienskis conclude, it's telling us that privatization "may not be the best route to effective and equitable educational opportunities for all."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.