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Statement by
NEPC Publications Director Alex Molnar
on
***Education Next* and Matthew M. Chingos' Defense**
of Cyberschool Operator K12 Inc.'s Financial Practices,
Lack of Transparency and Poor Academic Results

An article published today by the Brookings Institution's Matthew M. Chingos criticizes a recent NEPC research brief, *Understanding and Improving Full-Time Virtual Schools* (<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/understanding-improving-virtual>).

The brief focuses on K12, Inc., a for-profit firm that operates more taxpayer-funded cyber-schools than any other company. Using publically available data, the NEPC brief raised questions about the performance of K12 and recommended that, given the available evidence, states “slow or put a moratorium on the growth of full-time virtual schools.”

The NEPC brief brought together the available public information on key performance indicators, to explain what we do—and do not—know about K12 Inc. The brief found that the available data show weak academic performance for K12 Inc. students and pointed out that better information and stronger data are necessary before it will be possible to draw definitive conclusions. Taking all of this into account, the NEPC brief recommended caution. Chingos sees the same situation and instead of supporting the call for caution pending better data, he attacks the messenger.

Chingos' report, to be published in the spring edition of the Hoover Institution publication, *Education Next*, criticizes *Understanding and Improving Full-Time Virtual Schools* for using “flawed measures of school performance” (i.e., the Adequate Yearly Progress proficiency rates required under NCLB). Oddly, this is precisely what the NEPC brief expressly states, calling AYP data “weak and flawed measures” with “limited usefulness.” In fact, in my view, the brief's criticisms of AYP data are even stronger than Chingos'.

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Since the NEPC brief raised red flags about both the performance of K12 and the adequacy of the data, one would think that a criticism of those warnings would present at least some evidence to justify setting aside concerns detailed in the brief. Yet the Chingos article does not make any such effort. Mr. Chingos just opines that NEPC should have had better data.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that, despite their weakness, the measures used in the NEPC brief represented the best available evidence of K12's performance at the time and are the same measures that policy makers have used to evaluate other public schools. In addition to AYP status, the NEPC brief also examined state school performance ratings, mean passing rates in math and reading, graduation rates, and student attrition. It is clear that across all these measures K12 schools perform poorly.

There's an old definition of chutzpah: the kid who killed his parents and then pleads for mercy because he's an orphan. If K12 Inc.'s supporters and defenders want to contest conclusions drawn with publicly available data, they are in the best position to settle the argument by providing instead of withholding information. We invite K12 to provide researchers and policy makers with further data.

As the NEPC brief showed—and nothing in Mr. Chingos' *Education Next* article counters this—children who enroll in a K12 Inc. cyber school, who receive full-time instruction in front of a computer instead of in a classroom with a live teacher and other students, do not perform well on available measures of performance in reading and math. These children are also more likely to move between schools or leave school altogether.

Gary Miron, the NEPC brief's lead author, is perhaps the nation's leading expert on education management organizations. He has taught evaluation and conducted school evaluations for 10 years in Europe and 15 years in the states. Building on his ongoing research into the education management industry, Miron has made a real contribution to the policy discussion by evaluating K12 Inc.'s results.

Instead of attacking an NEPC report for not having better data, Mr. Chingos and the editors of *Education Next* should call for K12 Inc. and the entire virtual school industry to be fully transparent and provide the data those policy makers need to make sound decisions.

The current situation calls for statutes and regulations that require the systematic gathering, achieving, and publication of more and better data about virtual school performance and virtual education providers. Until then, Mr. Chingos would be well advised to follow the logic of his own argument and support the recommendation that the growth of virtual schools be slowed until we figure out how to make them work.

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