

THE IMPACT OF REFORMS ON THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to track the origin of new public management principles in the United States education reform and the first attempt of neo-corporatist practices in the policy making process. After examining the context of the reform, the article presents some key-changes that occurred in the educational system, like the aims of the charter schools, the role of educational epistemic communities, and the purpose of market-based principles. After examining the limits and critics of experts regarding the effects of public education reform under NPM rules and principles, the conclusion emphasizes the necessity of a proper balance between public and private objectives, accountability and practices for the governance of the educational system.

Keywords: charter schools; epistemic communities, educational system

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IMPACTUL REFORMELOR ASUPRA SISTEMULUI EDUCAȚIONAL AMERICAN

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Rezumat

Acest articol urmărește originea principiilor noului management public în cadrul reformei educaționale a Statelor Unite și efectele primelor practici neo-corporatiste în procesul de elaborare a politicilor publice. După trecerea în revistă a contextului reformei, articolul prezintă unele schimbări cheie care au avut loc în sistemul educațional, cum ar fi misiunea școlilor de tip charter, rolul comunităților educaționale epistemice și finalitățile principiilor de piață în educație. După examinarea limitelor și criticii experților în ceea ce privește efectele reformei învățământului public în conformitate cu regulile și principiile NMP, este subliniată oportunitatea și necesitatea unui echilibru între obiectivele publice și cele de factură privată, responsabilitatea și practicile necesare pentru o bună guvernare a sistemului educațional.

Cuvinte cheie: școli charter, comunități epistemice, educație



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1. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that public schools are not like other organizations, because they have ambiguous goals, uncoordinated activities, and structural elements closely linked to organizational outcomes. Furthermore, there are weak links between policy makers, administrative action and teachers. Specialist define the decision-making process as a "garbage can" model, where problems, possible solutions and opportunities are thrown without any interaction between them. (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1976). Moreover, in this system the rules are often violated, and the implementation of policies is never a priority, the assessments are made in more than superficial manner, and in most cases there are few consequences for failure because student achievement is not a criterion.

In response, American decision-makers at the central level have initiated a reform following the successful models from private enterprises. By applying neo-corporatist policies and practices used in the New Public Management, they tried to give to give this system more consistency. (Terry, 2003).

The introduction of NMP techniques into policies and processes educational system and organizations was influenced by several forces:

- external environmental pressures
- the emergence of new strong institutional actors,
- emerging institution capacity in the desire to connect with different stakeholders.

As a result, the educational policy process has changed dramatically over the last three decades, with large businesses and corporations becoming major players in the education, new models of school management, and additional actors in the policymaking process. The institutional environment of education was changed, with more emphasis being placed on monitoring organizational performance in the pursuit of a more coherent educational policy. School systems in the United States are experiencing much stronger demands for technical performance and are under increasing pressure to improve student performance (Rowan and Miskel, 1999).

In 2001, the "No Child Left Behind" Law reorganizing the primary and secondary education system was created on the New public management principles, in order to support the performance-based education reform. Examples of this reforms include school accountability, merit-based systems, choose school, neo-corporatist movement, standards and measurable objectives in order to improve individual outcomes. The law did not provide for a federal standard, each state setting its own attention and focus on objectives, performance standards and a growing and more rigorous responsibility.

2. EDUCATION REFORM AND NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Education is a big business, and educators themselves represent almost one third of the public sector employees in the emergent and developed countries. Due to the inoperability of public sector services, decision makers have attempted to introduce the New Public Management mode of governance, to make „the government function an efficient and effective performances - oriented business enterprise” (Terry, 2003). This approach was considered an attack on the bureaucratic public administration paradigm, where US presidents as Ronald Reagan, and then Clinton and Gore gave their full support, under the aegis of National Performance Review.

Politicians started from the premise that red tape was the problem, and the practices from the private sector are superior to the public system, by definition. So. The best way to repair the damages made by bureaucracy is to make the government customer and performance oriented. To encourage public sector to become a „practical and impatient business”, private sector techniques were transferred to the public sector (Kaufman, 1998).

In education sector the political speech was so dramatic, that some critics assimilate the public school bureaucracy with socialism (Lubienski, 2001). The main objective of introducing managerialism was to manage education instead of administering education (Tolofari in Davis, 2016). As a result the primary and secondary educational system was reformed through the „No Child Left Behind” law, which set a new set of standards and high performance measurable objectives, because a greater attention and focus on performance will improve individual outcomes in education. According to new public management’s market-based liberalization, each state was left with the power of setting its own standards and objectives. Privatization, decentralization, outsourcing, performance bonuses, vouchers were some main practices used by school districts across USA (Terry, 2003).

The changes in educational management organizations in public education in USA extended the role of the private sector in the public sphere. Critics argued that we were witnessing a redefinition of public education "from a public to a private good"(Lubienski, 2001) since education was seen as a commodity of the marketplace (Davis, 2016). As a result of neo-corporatist agendas, policies and processes using market-driven management have led to the emergence of new institutional actors with the task of destroying government monopoly.

In his work Tavis D. Jules (2016) emphasizes the main definitions of the USA’s reform of educational system:

- „The rise of educational governance has come to be synonymous with New Public Management”
- Educational multilateralism – the ascendancy of embedded liberalism as core attributes
- Educational fundamentalism – the drastic increase in funding for education from international financial institutions
- Governing without governance– given by critics who conceive that the current set of institutional mechanism are inadequate.

3. NEW MODELS OF GOVERNANCE

3.1. *Charter schools*

This reform included the introduction of the charter school (or schools of choice) a concept which originates in 1974 by Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts. This type of primary and secondary schools receives government funding, but operates independently of the state school system they are in, or in some cases, in private property, incorporating performance-based responsibility. The first Charter school was opened in 1991 in the state Minnesota (the first state to pass the charter school law) and from then the number of charter schools has increased considerably, reaching 6,004 charter entities in 2012, an remaining in an accelerated mode that will allow them to pay a central role in education over the next years (Survey of Americas Charter Schools).

This ideal NPM School was design to operate like a private business, free from many state and district laws and regulation, financially autonomous, without tuition fees, religious affiliation, or selective student admissions. Also, as in private organizations, charter schools have higher levels of accountability than traditional public schools towards the student, families and the organization granting the authorization („authorizer”).

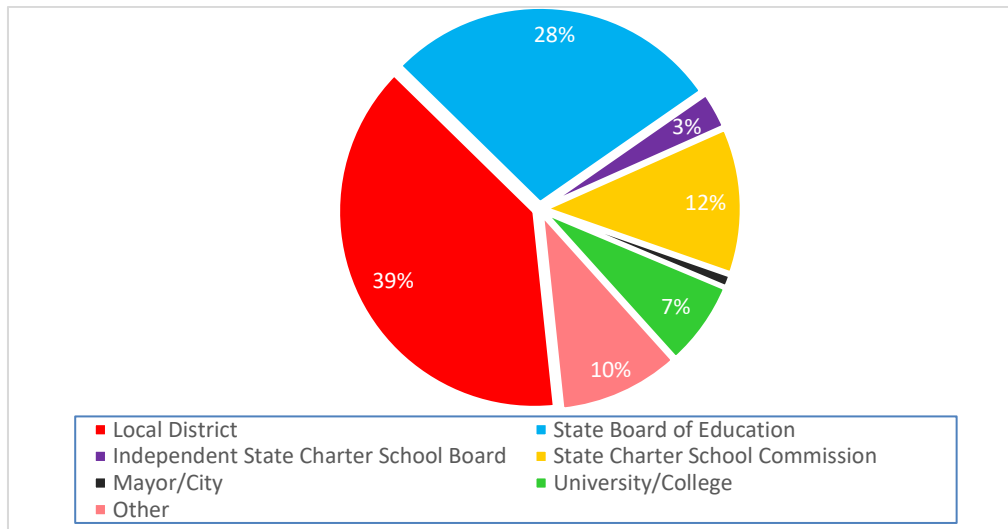


FIGURE 1 - CHARTER AUTHORIZATION
 Source: Charter School Survey, 2014

The charter is a statutory defined contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success and performance. Through them the school is authorized to function for 3-5 years until they need to renew their charter. Charter authorizers may include state, district or local boards of education, colleges, universities, independent state charter boards, or something else. Over 60 percent of charter schools are authorized by an entity other than the local school district, therefore states with multiple authorizers have more charter schools.

Also, the charter schools that provide extended instructional time, such as a longer school day or a longer school year, have increase recently, from 23% in 2009 to 48% in 2012 with an average rate of 340 schools per year.

Like public schools, charters receive state funding based on the number of children enrolled, but they can benefit from additional fundraising (grants and donations) in order to pay for programmes that are not fully funded by state or school districts.(California Charter Schools Association).

On average, charter schools receive 36% less funding than public schools, and unlike them, they do not receive facilities funds, therefore they are forced to find and rent a suitable space (Survey of Americas Charter Schools, 2014). As described below, charter facilities are most commonly rented from private commercial sources, followed by the school district, or non-profit organizations. Less common sources include churches, individual properties, federal, state, local, and universities.

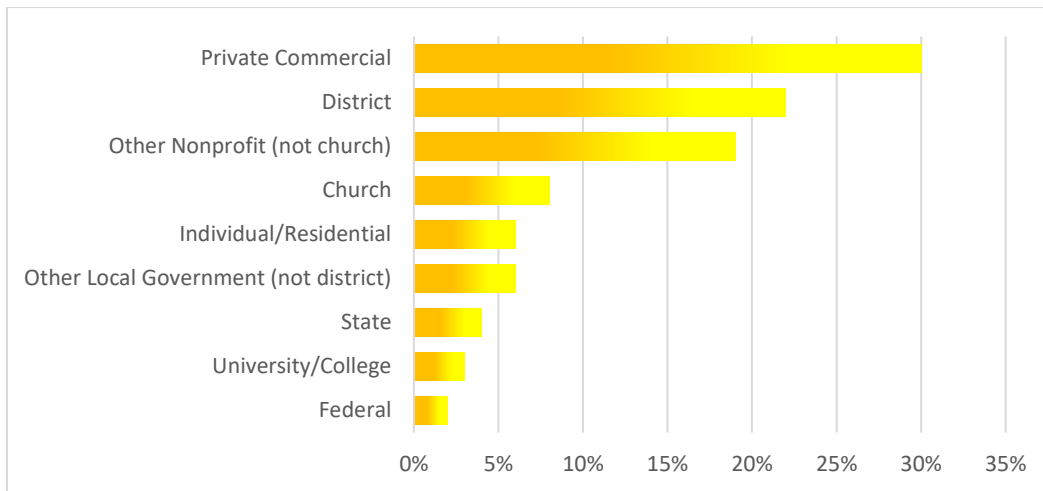


FIGURE 2 - PROPERTY OWNERS OF RENTED CHARTER SCHOOL FACILITIES
Source: Charter School Survey, 2014

On the other hand, charters serve a more disadvantaged student profile, including more low-income and minority students than traditional public schools. Charter students are more likely to qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) due to low-income in their families. Also, many children who are in need of Special Education Program (SPED) or to learn the English language in addition to his or her native language (English Language Learner Program- ELL) address themselves to the charter schools. On the other hand, traditional public schools have more accelerated learning programs due to gifted and talented pupils they have. Also, only 45% of charter students are white, while in public school the percentage is 52,5%.

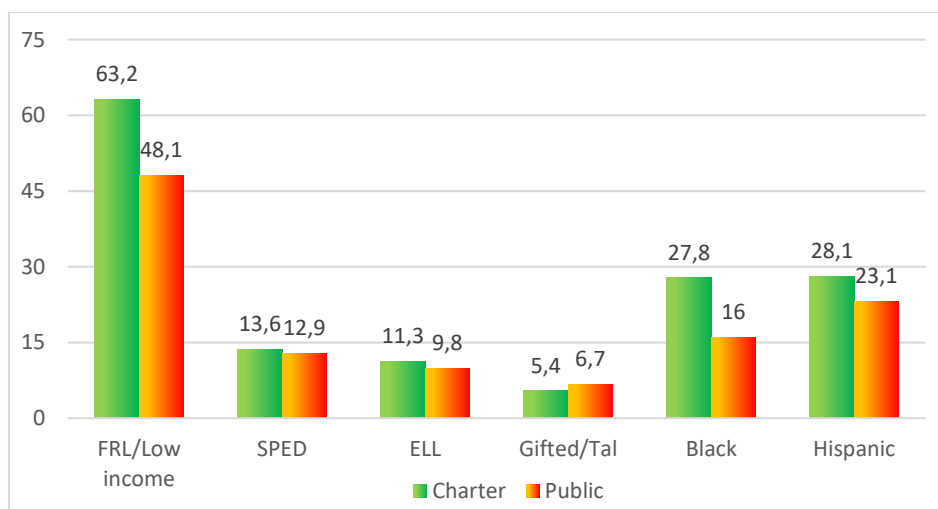


FIGURE 3 -CHARTER AND PUBLIC STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS
Source: Charter School Survey, 2014

The survey proves that charters provide smaller learning environments for students. In 2012 the typical charter school had 286 students, compared to 475 students in traditional public elementary schools and 684 in traditional public high schools. Unfortunately, in has also been an increase in the number of students on waiting lists for enrollment to the charter schools, for instance the average waiting list has increased with 40 students in 3 years.

Often charter pursue innovative academic vision rather typically use of books and courses like in public school. In fact, they emphasize a strong, challenging academic program, where the most popular educational approach is college preparatory (33%), and a substantial number (17 %) focus on Core Knowledge with an integrated understanding in literature, history, science, math, and other subjects. A very popular approach is the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) area with 8%. As modern methods, some charters use Blending Learning, Constructivism (constructing their knowledge through hands-on experiences and problem solving) and Montessori (based on scientific observations and freedom in the desire of studying). Some Charter schools have a Virtual/online academic approach or home/individual study (2% in both cases).

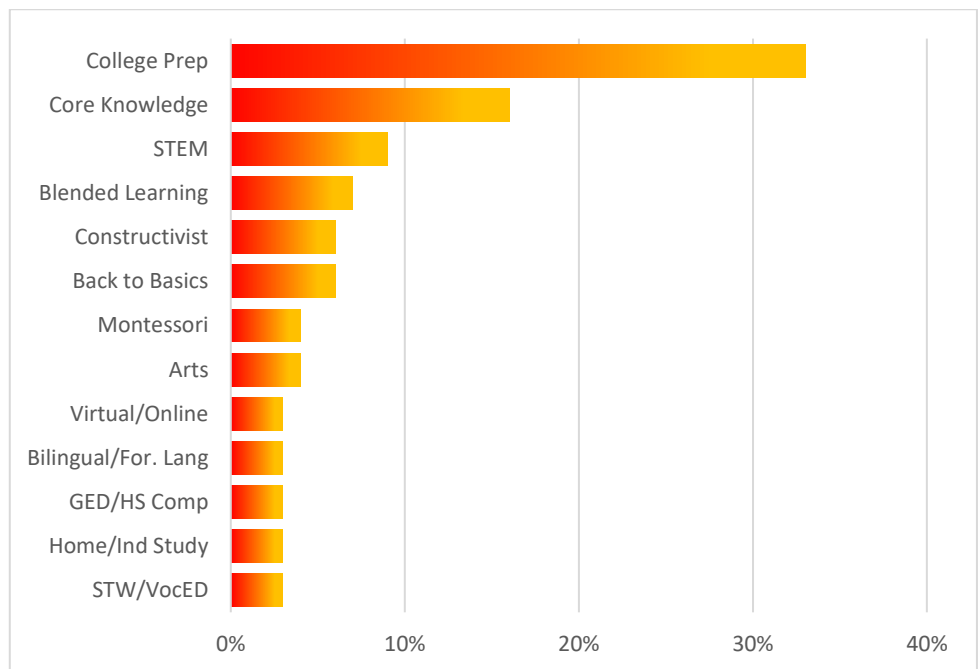


FIGURE 4 - CHARTER SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL APPROACH
 Source: Charter School Survey, 2014

The charter school movement continues to grow at to implement reforms that traditional public schools still struggle with. These include rigorous academic curricula, skill- and performance-based compensation for educators, extended instructional time, and many others in order to address themselves to the needs of parents and students.

4. EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES IN EDUCATION POLICY MAKING

The epistemic communities is a network of professionals with recognize expertize and competences in a particular domain which gives them the authority to relevant input knowledge within an issue area (Haas, 1992). They consist in people with similar beliefs and principles, even if they do not have the same background in academic and professional aspects.

Antoniades's approach on epistemic communities defines two types: the ad-hoc coalition (for understanding policy problems and finding solution through the thought of the communities and) and the holistic epistemic community with a more constant and holistic character aiming in order to establish and perpetuate beliefs and visions through dominant social discourses" (Antoniades 2003).

Even if, the concept creators, Haas and Antoniades have designed them for international communities, the epistemic communities exist and function in the governance of education. All their members share "an active dedication to the cause " (Davis, 2016), an expertise in the fields given by the academic and professional background (government civil servants, research organizations, university research centers, education management consulting firms, think tanks, profit/nonprofit organizations in the field) and also the ability to spot arguments for new proposals.

The epistemic community members has access to the political system and can influence in policy debates. In fact they have four methods to exert influence in the formation of a policy: (Dotterweich, 2009)

- policy innovation – the epistemic community frames the issue, set standards and determine which forum is most appropriate for the issue to be addressed.
- policy diffusion - to apply pressure on governments, they spread their ideas with their colleagues in other organizations, during conferences, publications, and other venues for exchanging information
- policy selection - policymakers may call upon an epistemic community whose ideas align with their own for the purposes of legitimizing their policy selection.
- policy persistence - maintain longevity of consensus on ideas and goals among community members. When consensus is diminish, the authority of the epistemic community wanes.

The epistemic communities were involved in the policymaking of the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) during the policymaking and also after the law was signed. They acted as "advisors" or "sources of information" to influence the policy agents and their interests. Also, they added new issues to the

agenda and changed the manner in which issues were conceptualized. When the epistemic communities were asked to work at the policy details, critics believe that the members acted like political leaders, and not only like experts.

Five different epistemic communities were involved in the policymaking of the NCLB Act: four of them with constant and holistic actions and one ad-hoc epistemic community. These communities struggled against each other and influenced many of the cognitive and practical actions. Additionally, they had access to the institutional structure, in the Congress, which was crucial to obtain the expected effects (Dotterweich, 2009).

5. THE NPM MARKET-BASED PRINCIPLES IN EDUCATION REFORM

Large businesses and corporations have become major players in the education reform movement, being encouraged by a confluence of forces, competition, and very often critics on American education. Since the 1980s corporations and business have consistently pressed for system-wide and influenced school reforms to link them stronger to the international economic competition.

In the attempt of a neo-corporative movement, policy makers must create a coherent policy systems by aligning key strategies to support demanding learning objectives (like improving students' achievements) with the support of a more centralized control and more efficient command structures.

The ideology and the application of market-based principles to the public education system are fundamental principles of NPM, exemplified NCLB law. For example, the US federal government asks the districts to identify low-performance schools in order to develop ample improvement plans for them. Also, according to the NCLB Act, school districts must test all children (in grades 3-8) in reading, mathematics and science in the direction of the option offered to children from low-performance schools of transferring to another public school. In fact, the federal government will make public detailed schooling books to reveal student performance on different indicators (as ethnic sub-groups, teacher qualifications, quality indicators). In this manner, parents whose children attend poor quality schools will transfer their children to other schools, forcing the educational institutions to improve.

The initiative of choosing a school is a victory of NPM techniques for improving education. A series of studies in Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland and Texas report the effectiveness of the initiative regarding the extensive choice of public and inter-district public schools, including "magnet" schools, alternative schools and charter schools. (Fusarelli, 2003).

Another „victory” of NPM is the creation of the centralized system of responsibility interconnecting the system of rewarding performance for teachers and with the schools performances, which emphasizes the responsibility regarding the student. In this case, states developed policies to increase academic curricular standards and increase student performance. Several states, including Vermont, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas move towards a closer policy coordination on the goals, means and funding of training (Davis, 2016, p. 136).

Management consulting firms (MCFs) are another example of reform in the public education field. Their role is to support schools districts and individual schools in creating their own strategies based on production of knowledge management with a higher demand of accountability. For instance, Chicago Public Schools developed many projects with this type of firms in order to reduce the high school dropout, to increase the college enrollment and job placement rates at the end of K-12. (Davis, 2016)

On the other hand, some critics believe that contrary to the expectations of market efficiency and excellence, the contracting of educational services to private companies has not proved to be an effective tool for improving schools. They emphasize that MCFs such as Edison Project, Tesseract Group, Educational Alternatives Inc. have failed to demonstrate substantial effectiveness and to significantly improve learning outcomes. Sawicky, an economist himself, suggests that "the legend of business expertise ... is more apparent than reality" (Sawicky in Davis, 2016).

6. LIMITS OF REDEFINING THE "PUBLIC" UNDER NPM PRINCIPLES

Examining the infusion of neo-corporatist ideology and of NPM policies and practices in the education reform, critics raised the question whether the NPM have changed the "public" nature in schools. First, deliberations and eventually decision-making process in public organizations are most of the time different from those in private ones, because of the increased number of participants and stakeholders involved.

Efforts to revitalize education by results-based standards and responsibility policies - with federal and state governments assuming accountability for monitoring educational performance –can weaken local and district school control and also jeopardize democratic governance and decentralization. Furthermore, NPM is blamed for "privatization" of the delivery of educational services and for the diminishing of public character, since the charter schools are not governed by local government boards

The characteristic of the public system is that it satisfies the common good. Critics are wondering if NPM has the capacity to respond adequately to the needs of the entire public, given the fact that it is focused on responding to the individual needs. Like other public sectors, in education system there is a

difficulty to please both the recipient of the services and the taxpayer, which finds it difficult to find the benefits obtained from the organizational outcomes. Moreover, the situation becomes even more problematic given the number of taxpayers without children enrolled in schools.

From the first NPM theorists, it was pointed that the administrators are required to become entrepreneurs, but to keep their mission in the social and moral aspects, not just economic and cost-effective (Peter Druker, 1985). In this case, market-based reforms may be inadequate for schools as public organizations, in the absence of a profit criterion in assessments. Given the fact that the educational system has very diverse and complex outcomes, it is hard to define, measure and analyze them according to the private sector firms' practices. When it comes to the reward of performance, many schools abandoned merit pay systems because in practice it was difficult to link and measure individual success with the performance of the schools and teachers. Also, the NCLB possibility to choose the school have not shown reforms that have made school a more efficient and effective, but it increased racial and socio-economic segregation in public schools, because it produced winners and losers (Brown and Contreras, 1991).

This are some of the major issues in achieving the objectives included in the NCLB act, using NPM techniques and market-based principles as a mechanism for school improvement, but it still presents a challenge for policy-makers to develop a system for successful educational governance.

CONCLUSIONS

Education is one of the few areas where the state must provide equal services, quality education and same opportunities to all children, regardless of where they live, the income in their families, the native language, and other criteria which can discriminate. From this point of view, it can be extrapolated that the USA constitution assigns the education system to distinguish itself from other public services.

Although some NPM innovations were well intentioned, they did not achieve the expected result. Even if the performance reward system was designed to create an open competition between schools and to force a constant improvement inside the educational institutions, in practice it polarized schools and segregated children who have access to educational services. Also the epistemic communities that should have brought a comprehensive approach to the NCLB law with the involvement of all stakeholders have left that many passions and individual interfere in the content and the implementation of the law.

This suggests that many of the lessons learned about what works in private organizations are not directly transferable to the public sector, public and private spheres may differ significantly. Because

schools do not operate in the markets in the literal sense of the word, we should not expect that neo-corporatist market-based reforms to prove itself to be equally successful and effective as they did in the private sector. The challenge of educational governance is to develop more customized reforms for this field, not only on market-based mechanisms as a vehicle for educational improvement.

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