

Chapter 1

The *New York Times*/AFT Charter School Controversy

August 17, 2004, was a warm day in Washington, D.C., the temperature in the eighties, the tail end of an unusually cool and wet summer, the time of year that political activists, public officials, and journalists sometimes refer to as the summer doldrums. For the rest of the year, most of the nation's political and policy attention is focused on Washington. Lobbyists, advocacy groups, media outlets, and congressional staff wait poised and ready to respond to whispers and rumors that might signal shifts in partisan fortunes or be exploited for political gain. Washington was built on a swamp, however, and, even in the age of central air conditioning, often oozes a humidity that induces lethargy and drives the lucky ones who can to escape to Rehoboth Beach and Martha's Vineyard.

With Congress out of session, the town seemingly half empty, and many of the nation's commentators reading beach novels instead of the day's headlines, the stage was hardly set for a raging controversy. The letters to the editor section of the *New York Times*, rather than buzzing with sharp debates about Iraq or Vice President Cheney, gave much of its attention (six letters) to responses to the passing of television chef Julia Child. "I recall that she once said that a person who didn't eat butter was a crank with limp hair," wrote Estelle Shanley of York, Maine. "Julia Child lives on in all our kitchens."

For charter school supporters, however, this was what one observer labeled "a day that will live in infamy" (Petrilli 2006). Those who did pick up the *New York Times* found, besides reflections on the loss of a culinary cultural icon, the prominent page one display of a story about charter schools. "Charter Schools Trail in Results, U.S. Data Reveals," read the headline. The article, by *Times* reporter Diana Jean Schemo, described a report released by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) on the performance of charter schools, a rapidly expanding mechanism of education reform.

"The first national comparison of test scores among children in charter schools and regular public schools shows charter school students

often doing worse than comparable students in regular public schools,” Schemo wrote in her opening sentence. She went on to describe the findings as “buried in mountains of data the Education Department released without public announcement,” implying that the Bush administration, which was a vocal and active proponent of charter schools, had tried to suppress the evidence.¹

Charter schools are just one in an array of school choice options that have been breaking down the historical link between where one lives and the schools one’s children attend. The most controversial of these are publicly funded school vouchers² that families can apply toward tuition at private schools. Vouchers are controversial because they are often linked to a general argument that private markets are superior to government as an institution for meeting social needs. Some school choice options, though, are wholly incorporated within the traditional framework of public school districts—among them, magnet schools,³ interdistrict public choice,⁴ and more liberalized transfer options. Charter schools generally are designed to straddle the line that traditionally distinguishes public schools from private. They are officially public schools, but the charter concept envisions them as being managed largely independent of government regulation.

Just a little more than fifteen years since the first charter school opened in Minnesota, there are now nearly 4,000 nationwide, serving an estimated 1.1 million students (Center for Education Reform 2007). The laws governing charter schools differ—sometimes substantially—from state to state, of course, but some general characteristics have emerged. Charter schools receive public funding on a per-student basis, are often responsible for achieving educational outcomes defined by their government chartering entity, and are subject to at least nominal public oversight. They typically are barred from charging tuition on top of the public per-pupil allocation, but are free to pursue other forms of supplementary support from donors, foundations, or corporate sponsors. Although they must observe certain baseline regulations, such as prohibitions on discrimination and the provision of safe environments, they are exempt from many of the rules and regulations that bind regular public schools to specific standards and procedures. This hybrid status, as we shall see, has made charter schools a special focus of attention and helped draw them into ideological whirlpools that raise the stakes surrounding the research into their actual form and consequences.

The *New York Times* article was as striking for its location as for its content. In the real estate of newsprint, the most valuable property is on the front page and “above the fold.” The *New York Times*, too, is arguably the nation’s premier print outlet, at least when it comes to catch-

ing the attention of national policy elites. With the best spot in the best paper, this was a story unlikely to be ignored.

Despite the summer doldrums, “all hell broke loose” (Petrilli 2006). Within days, proponents of charters and other choice-based and market-oriented approaches to school reform had launched a counterattack. Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform, a Washington-based organization supported by conservative foundations, tracked down prominent researchers, many on their summer vacations, to see whether they would be willing to have their names listed on a protest ad. The full-page ad, which cost over \$115,000, ran just eight days after the article first appeared. Rather than simply affirming a policy stance in favor of charter schools, the text⁵ read almost like a primer on proper methodology for conducting research, taking the *Times* to task for failing to subject the AFT report to a more rigorous and skeptical review. At the same time, school choice proponents got busy placing editorials, providing supporters with talking points for discussion on television talk shows, issuing critiques on various electronic newsletters and blogs, and publicizing a report by Caroline Hoxby, a Harvard economist, which they claimed was much stronger methodologically and which they said arrived at the opposite conclusion: that charter schools were working very well indeed.

The experience strengthened the sense among some in the conservative community that the *Times* was an avowed opponent of market-based ideas for reforming schools and that they needed to be primed with a strike team for quick response. It was not long, however, before the rebuttals themselves were being subject to intense scrutiny—and to charges that the critics of the AFT report were hypocritically and selectively using the standards of social science to mask and advance an agenda grounded more in ideology than evidence. These charges and countercharges make this case a useful window into a troubling phenomenon. Despite high hopes about its potential to promote collective learning and a more informed democracy, research often seems to appear on the public stage in a swirl of political sloganeering that defies reason, fogs understanding, and runs the risk of reducing claims of scientific evidence to the status of Madison Avenue advertising claims.

The Issue and Its Significance: Collective Learning About Education Policy and Practice

Research and evidence have had an ambiguous role in informing public policy and citizens in the United States. On the one hand, the vision that the technical tools, expertise, and objectivity of social science might

help in the pursuit of the collective good has had a powerful influence at critical points in American history. On the other, the nation's commitment to social science research has been sporadic, shallow, and at times cynically manipulative. Competing sides in contemporary policy debates typically match one another study for study, and muster equal indignation about their opponents' know-nothing refusal to bow to the power of the cold hard facts. Observers have to figure out how to get beyond the posturing. To disentangle evidence from assertion, they need sophistication in distinguishing the good studies from the bad. Observers must know which findings are compelling and which are only suggestive, which conclusions have general and transferable implications and which apply only in particular contexts and times.

The public, even the attentive public, depends heavily on the media to keep informed and to sort through competing claims. (The inattentive public settles for vague and symbolic allusions to research—if it cares about research at all.) Unfortunately, overworked and under-trained journalists often lack the time and expertise really to master the research methodologies in play. New media, too—various blogs, electronic newsletters, and Web sites—provide alternative channels, but these can be even more amateurish and unreliable than traditional outlets. Even journalists who have the training, experience, and inclination to dig deep are limited by editorial priorities, space constraints, and assessments of how much complexity their audience is willing to tolerate.

Against this backdrop, what are we to make of the fact that a relatively simple report, presenting publicly available data and addressing a policy about which many Americans remain unaware, was thought to warrant front-page attention? What are we to make of the fact that the subsequent debate has pushed methodological intricacies into the forefront of the public agenda? Is it a sign of the public's growing willingness to wrestle with the tough questions about social issues? Or is it just another illustration of the shallowness of our collective understanding—just one more case of claim and counterclaim substituting for reasoned analysis? Does the fact that social scientists are willing to speak out publicly and to work harder to get their findings more quickly into the hands of citizens and policy makers mean that they are finally coming down from their ivory towers and turning their skills to solving real problems in the near-term? Or does it reflect the further degradation of science, that its symbols have been co-opted and its prestige borrowed in service to base political interests and ideologically driven campaigns?

Sniping among researchers, of course, is nothing new. Nor is it, in and of itself, particularly alarming. Medical researchers publicly clash over the health risks of salt or fat in the diet. Climatologists tussle about the extent—or even the existence—of global warming (Revkin 2006).

Those who study stem cells argue about whether, as a Bush administration appointee to the President's Council on Bioethics once averred: "Every embryo for research is someone's blood relative."⁶ In these instances, too, competing interest groups call on their own stock of favored studies and researchers, and claims about what constitutes "good" research seem manipulated to discredit those on the opposite side. Indeed, the phenomenon is so common that it appears to be part of the warp and woof of normal scientific exchange—the pluralistic clash of theories and methods that ultimately protects us from settling too comfortably into orthodoxies.

Some distinctions are worth making, however, between competition and warfare, between critique and attack. When it comes to school choice research, the boundaries have seemed at times unusually porous. Choice proponents charge their adversaries with employing bad science as part of a campaign to, as some put it, "pillory, marginalize, and suppress" their research.⁷ Choice critics charge their opponents with "chicanery."⁸ In one of several high-profile battles, the political scientists John Witte of the University of Wisconsin and Paul Peterson of Harvard engaged in what became a rather nasty exchange. Their battle, and mutual name-calling, eventually erupted onto the front pages of the *Wall Street Journal* (Davis 1996).⁹ Characterizing the charter school debate overall, two researchers from the nonpartisan think tank RAND concluded that it "often appears to be driven by theory and ideology, with little information on how the reform itself is affecting students" (Zimmer and Buddin 2006).

Handled openly and honestly, even intense scientific disagreements have the potential to illuminate public discourse. The vitriol of charter school debate, however, seems to many observers to obscure more than it informs. "One of the more negative features of contemporary educational policy debates is the way in which a number of 'camps' have adopted a strategy of intellectual non-engagement and avoidance toward differing positions," wrote one observer, reflecting explicitly on the AFT study and the high-profile reactions to it:

The martial metaphor of "camps" is deliberately chosen here, since the underlying logic of this strategy is one of opposing armies meeting on a field of battle. The essentials one needs to know in any debate, according to this view of educational policy, is who lines up with your army and who lines up against it—is the advocate of this policy friend or enemy? The substance of the argument made for or against a policy is largely immaterial. Indeed, it is better not to discuss that substance, since a discussion might reveal a weakness in one's own position, or worse, the strength of the alternative position. All that is important is whether or not the "policy" in question is part of your weaponry, and whether its advocates belong to your army. (Casey 2005)

When scientific pluralism morphs into political attack and counter-attack, more than civility is at risk. Scanning a field full of landmines, some of the best young scholars may turn to other areas of inquiry, choking off the supply of research in areas where it is arguably most needed. Even more troubling is the prospect of what we give up as a society if the boundaries between research and ideological warfare become so blurred that politicians, foundations, the media, and the public essentially conclude that there are no such boundaries at all.

A Puzzle

I was drawn into writing this book by a puzzle. I have studied and written about issues relating to school choice for nearly twenty years. In the beginning, I learned that this was a high-voltage topic. In my first book on the subject, I expressed wariness toward choice—particularly the more radical forms and more explicitly market-oriented arguments in its favor. However, perhaps because the book was less strident in its claims, less personalized in its review of others' studies, less black and white in its conclusions, I was not, as others were, immediately typed as belonging to one camp or another. As a result, I have for years been able to maintain cordial relations with researchers on each side of the debate, and been privy to the ways in which they talked about the issue and about one another. I knew the characterizations were harsh, and often reciprocal. In the earlier years of the debate, each camp also seemed to share confidence that time and solid evidence, once collected, would prove its views correct, and expose those of the other side as having been based on ideology.

Over time, I noticed a new dimension. In private discussions, the positions researchers staked out became less stark, more nuanced. Those who broadly favored choice became more willing, based on accumulating evidence, to admit that many examples of charter schools were no better than most traditional public schools, and that indeed some of them were worse. They became quicker to admit, too, that the strong claims made by voucher and charter school advocates were unrealistic, and that the poor test performance of many low-income and minority children depends on things that happen outside of school and cannot be attributed to poor teaching or unresponsive school bureaucracies alone. At the same time, many who raised the early alarm about the possibly destructive consequences of choice—its potential to resegregate schools by race and class and to draw funds out of an already depleted public school system—began to admit that some of their fears were proving overdrawn. They were seeing evidence that charter schools were not, as they had feared, catering to a white and well-off clientele, that many charter school founders and teachers were deeply

committed professionals with clear records of serving disadvantaged populations, and that many in the charter school constituency were advocates of better and more responsive government, not of displacing the government with markets.

Yet—and this is what puzzled me—in their public pronouncements, some of the same researchers who seemed to be moving toward some common ground were as likely as ever to be quoted as representing sharply divergent views. This was partly, but not only, a matter of how they were selectively quoted by journalists and advocates. The resistance toward acknowledging a more nuanced and complex common ground was not revealed just in the popular press, however; it showed too in what the researchers themselves were writing. Whereas data and findings often provided weak and mixed pictures, these scholars' papers revealed framing and policy conclusions that often seemed to go further, to reinforce the polarized positions, to resist—as if it would be a sign of muddied-headedness or lack of confidence—staking out a reformulated understanding of the charter school debate that did not fit neatly into the pro- and anti- parameters in which the school choice argument originally was born.

What was going on? Was this a case, I wondered, of social scientists getting seduced by the shiny trappings of small-scale notoriety that come with getting one's name cited in a public debate? Was it a case of social scientists doing what so many people had asked them to do: coming out of the ivory tower and making sure the knowledge they were creating was translated into useful and effective forms of social change? Maybe there was a third alternative: that the root of polarization had less to do with the behaviors of researchers and more with the echo chamber of the overly partisan and ideologically polarized society into which their small bits of evidence were being introduced. Were researchers whispering tiny truths only to be shocked to hear them reverberate with a stridency and affirmativeness they had not intended? As I wrestled personally with this puzzle, I became convinced that the answer would have bearing on the prospects for informed democracy, and implications also for the way in which we should direct our energies in shaping social reform. But I was not precisely sure how. One of the few luxuries of being an academic is being able, often, to let one's personal puzzles frame one's professional investigations. Having the luxury to do so, I set out to see what I could learn.

The Evidence

This book uses different kinds of data and different forms of analysis to zero in on the issues at stake. A primary source of data is the set of thirty-six formal interviews I conducted with researchers, advocates,

funders, and journalists. The twenty researchers I selected represented both sides and the middle of the spectrum in terms of their perceived placement on the pro- and anti-choice debate.¹⁰ I also interviewed five advocates who were closely involved either with the AFT study and its reaction or with charter school politics more generally, five funders representing a range of foundations, and six journalists who covered the issue or could provide insights into newspaper decisions about what constitutes newsworthiness and how much detail about research could and should be included. I used somewhat different interview protocols for the four types of respondents (researchers, advocates, funders, and journalists), though some questions overlapped.¹¹ Much of the protocol was open ended in format, but in one series of close-ended questions respondents were encouraged to select among several options. These close-ended questions provide the grist for some of the more systematic comparison tables and figures presented in the book. All interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded using NVivo software. The coding was used to help identify underlying themes and to make it easier to sift through the interviews to find illuminating quotations I sprinkle liberally throughout the book. A few of the tables and figures presented rely on coding the open-ended responses.

A possible concern in a project like this one, where the topic is interesting precisely because it is politically controversial, is the extent to which respondents can be expected to be open and honest. There are considerable and reciprocal layers of mistrust and hostility in this area, a sense that “the other guys” are disingenuous, spiteful, Machiavellian. Both before and during this research I heard individuals worry aloud about the prospect that this person or that has schemed or might scheme against them—bad-mouthed them to others, scuttled grant proposals or journal submissions under the cover of an anonymous review, damned with faint praise a young scholar’s tenure hearing.

I cannot claim to have miraculously cut through this fog of wariness to elicit consistently truthful and comprehensive answers. Certain factors, however, reduce the probability that I, and consequently you as reader, will have been the victim of deliberate and systematic misdirection. First, I offered respondents various levels of anonymity. They could ask not to be listed among those interviewed; they could request that the interview not be recorded; they could indicate that they did not want any identifying quotations to be used in the book; they could indicate that any identifying quotations would first have to be reviewed by them. As it developed, I encountered less skittishness than others had warned me to expect. Only two people I approached for interviews flatly turned me down; one other simply never answered email inquiries. Of those interviewed, only one refused to have the session recorded. In one case, logistical matters forced us to hold the interview

by email. None of those with whom I spoke refused to have his or her name listed as an interviewee.

Although it is awkward to assert this claim, I believe that a second, less formal, set of factors increasing the likelihood of receiving honest answers has to do with the fact that I was the person doing the interviews. I had existing relationships with exactly half of the respondents before the project and in nearly half of those the relationships were fairly close. I do not know, but suspect, that some of those with whom I did not have a prior relationship checked with others who knew me before going ahead with the interview. Although this increased the likelihood of getting open answers, it had the added advantage of letting me test the atmosphere and tone of the interviews with those who had been strangers against those with my acquaintances. With very few exceptions, my sense is that even those respondents who started off with some guardedness for the most part settled into a reasonably relaxed and revealing mode of discussion.

Third, I structured the interview protocol to encourage confidence in my respondents by starting off with more concrete questions that drew on their direct expertise, and saving for the end those more explicitly about the intersection of politics and evidence. I do not doubt that some answers were self-serving or evasive, but most often the respondents appeared intellectually engaged in the substance of the discussion and interested in helping shed some light on the issue.

Despite the fact that many of those I interviewed gave me *carte blanche* to attribute their quotes, I opted to mask identities except when respondents referred to events in which they were directly involved and when knowing their identity is critical to assessing the credibility of the accounts (in these latter cases, the text attributes quotes to the individuals without additional citation information). Instead I have used short ID tags, labeling respondents with a letter indicating their general role (A=advocate;¹² F=Funder; J=Journalist; R=Researcher) and a number. I made this decision largely for logistical reasons; it would have been awkward to include some names while masking others, but there may also be an advantage, I believe. Precisely because of how highly polarized the debate is, attaching names to observations might incline some readers to reject or suspect some comments without wrestling with them fully. Occasionally, I identify some respondents as being broadly favorable or opposed to choice to highlight either patterned responses that do break down on predictable lines or—more commonly—that comments so often either are consistent across the group or exhibit paradoxical or idiosyncratic patterns.

The book does not rely on these interviews alone. I had innumerable informal discussions with researchers about the topics dealt with here. I also supplemented the opinions, beliefs, and experiences of my

respondents with several more objective sources of data. As I delved deeper into the funding issue, I found it important to gather empirical information about actual funding practices, in both government and the foundation world. It was not enough just to look at who funded the important studies of charter schools, because that would leave matters unclear about how various funders' involvement in the issue fit within their broader portfolios of giving. I examined National Science Foundation grants and Department of Education grants and contracts. For foundations, I used Foundation Center data on private giving to explore the size and distributions of grants for education research, as well as those dealing more specifically with charters, vouchers, and school choice. More details on the data and methodology are provided in chapter 6. For now, suffice it to say that this approach led me to conclude that much of the important story had to do with what funders do instead of directly funding education, instead of funding research, and—when they do fund education research—instead of funding studies dealing specifically with school choice.

Although my interviews shed light on how researchers regard the media and how reporters regard education research, I found it important to collect some additional data with which to check these impressions and put them in a broader context. I analyze the broad scope of coverage of charters, vouchers, and school choice in five major newspapers, and examine more closely articles in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* that provide explicit discussion of research in these topics. This allows me, in chapter 7, to answer such questions as whether there is a difference in coverage between the purportedly anticharter *Times* and purportedly procharter *Journal*, and to systematically analyze how journalists present research and cite researchers.

A Brief Overview

Chapter 2 considers competing visions of the relationships among scientific research, mass democracy, and rational policy making. It contrasts an idealized vision of the policy sciences that has been influential at key times in American political and intellectual history to the cynical backlash that portrays research as little more than a weapon of manipulation and self-justification for partisan elites. It also raises the question of whether science, social institutions, and the public are up to the challenge of deliberative democracy and collective rationality. The idealized vision, however, is overly naïve in its aspirations for research, and overly cynical in its conception of politics.

Not every policy issue occasions the ideological engagement and polarization that has infused the charter school debate. Chapter 3 explains how the charter school issue came to be framed in terms of markets ver-

sus government, and how this in turn has raised the partisan stakes and made the issue so volatile and the stakes so high that little room is left for complexity, nuance, and contingency. This did not simply happen, it was in large measure the result of a deliberate strategy by conservative activists and foundations. Nor was it a phenomenon specific to charter schools. Rather, because of their popularity and political feasibility, charter schools became the arena in which a wide array of political interests chose to engage in a much broader war over privatization. Charter schooling need not have been framed this way, and in my judgment should not have been. However, in a manifestation of what is often referred to as path dependency, decisions made during the early 1990s continue to influence the course of research and democratic discourse today.

Chapter 4 presents in more detail the punch and counterpunch of the AFT charter school study and its critics, showing that this is not an aberration but an ongoing feature of the highly politicized debate around school choice and charter schools. The story here is a disturbing one for those who yearn for a more civil, thoughtful, and informed democratic discourse about important issues. At least as it plays out in the most visible public forums, research on charter schools appears to be not just inconclusive but fundamentally inconsistent, researchers appear to be not just offering contrasting methodologies and interpretations but also fiercely (and in highly personalized terms) challenging one another's motivations and competency. This image corrodes the legitimacy of research, reinforcing the impression that it is an extension of partisan wrangling, no different from public relations or lobbying, if in a slightly fancier garb.

Chapter 5 presents a partial antidote to depression, but underscores the puzzle that is at the core of this book. Despite the highly polarized uses of charter school research, I argue in this chapter, the enterprise of social science investigation is working much as what we would like to see. Although uncertainty and continued basis for debate remain, consensus has been tentatively reached on a set of findings that differ from earlier conjecture, are illuminating, and have the potential to lead to better policy. This convergence, however, has not led to a moderation of the way research is presented in public discourse.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore this puzzle in different ways. Chapter 6 zeroes in on public and private funding and the roles they may play in exacerbating the polarization of research. Support can be an important inducement for researchers to undertake certain kinds of study, and both its availability and conditions could play a role in polarizing the role that research plays in the public debate. Historically, conservatives argued that federal funding and large foundations have fueled a liberal agenda of expanding the public sector. More recently, liberals have

argued that the Bush administration used federal funds to aggressively promote charter schools and private sector involvement in education delivery, and that a few core activist conservative foundations have orchestrated research on vouchers and charter schools with the deliberate intent to discredit traditional public schools and build momentum for them to be displaced.

Drawing on my interviews and quantitative data on federal and foundation funding, chapter 6 shows that though funding may be less of a substantial and direct force in charter school research than many imagine, the funding environment is an important part of the story, albeit indirectly, as much through what is not funded as through what is. Proponents of charter schools, expecting that the results would be favorable to their arguments, were influential in leading the government to collect the data that the AFT later used in its report. When their expectations were confounded, some changed their stance and argued that the data were fundamentally flawed as a basis of comparing charter schools to traditional public schools, and that the federal government ought not have been conducting such studies in the first place. Foundations in general are not especially keen on using their dollars for research *per se*, and many of the largest foundations have been reluctant to engage with the voucher and charter school debates. This strategic withdrawal, however, gives a smaller number of highly focused foundations more influence in promoting pro-market research than they might otherwise be able to muster. Even when they cannot influence the content and findings of research, both public and private funders have influence through the roles they play in affecting which findings get attention and how they are characterized in the public realm.

Chapter 7 focuses on the various institutions that communicate research to policy makers and the public. Those who believe that research is little more than a political weapon portray the major media as an echo chamber that magnifies disagreements among researchers, either by selectively presenting the evidence or by exaggerating extreme interpretations in pursuit of greater drama and compelling stories. I argue that the media do play a role in polarizing research, but that it is less intentional and direct than cynics imagine. News coverage of charter school research by the major print media is not extensive or deep, but neither is it ideologically skewed. The editorial stance of the newspaper, however, does appear to affect its overall presentation of research, primarily through how it allocates space on its editorial and contributing opinion pages. Electronic media, in the meantime, have substantially sped up the transmission of research, but often through channels that are more ideologically and politically defined. Scholarly

journals, which could play an important role as arbiters of quality and significance, are bypassed or ignored, even more so in the education arena than in other areas of the physical, medical, and social sciences. As with funders, what the media do not do is in some ways as important as what they do.

Finally, in chapter 8, I return to the broader questions about the limits and possibilities of a more informed democracy. I do not try to revive the naïve vision of knowledge and research as incorruptible forces independent of and exogenous to politics and conflict. In a diverse and dynamic society, choosing directions for public policy necessarily involves making tough choices that create losers as well as winners. Agenda-setting and governance, accordingly, are irretrievably a focus of conflict, and making and enforcing decisions inevitably require exercising power. There are some irresolvable tensions between the needs of those who strive to maximize knowledge in a complex world and those who strive to make the best possible decisions despite disagreement and complexity. The different roles and values that animate researchers and politicians suggest that there will always be a pull and tug between science and governance. This is tolerable and probably even healthy, but systematic trends in the American political system—the echo chamber into which the charter issue was introduced—are exacerbating this normal tension, making reasoned, textured, pragmatic, and contextual analysis more likely to be drowned out against a background racket of ideological and partisan noise. Disentangling those that are endemic from those that are not is a challenge.

However, the degree and the ways in which conflict and power co-opt and distort research are variable. In the end, the tale told in this book is in some ways a hopeful one. Despite the high-stakes political maneuvering that has surrounded, and at times infected, the research enterprise regarding vouchers, charters, and school choice, I argue that the quality of research has improved, and that our prospects for mapping a policy route to better education have as a result also improved. Research and science do not have the answers to society's tough policy challenges, but they do have much they can contribute if properly constituted and properly understood. Even if it cannot steer democratic decision making, good research can inform it, save it from some misadventures, and in some cases set it on a more effective course. This is a less heroic but more realistic and sustainable vision of the role that research can play in democracy.

If the legitimate pursuit of policy-relevant research erases the boundaries between science and partisanship—indeed, maybe if it only appears that this is the case—the potential value of research will be eroded. There will be a social price to pay. However, though the

institutions and values that sustain good research are under pressure and weakening, the evidence presented here shows that they are resilient and not without defense. We need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what research can and cannot do, and we need to self-consciously nurture the conditions under which collective learning can thrive. That battle is important, but it has not been lost. I conclude the book with some proposals for modest reform.