



TRICKY MARKETING? HOW SCHOOLS SELL THEMSELVES TO STUDENTS



As nations around the world embrace choice-based education models that seek to emulate the competitive environment of the business world, schools are increasingly facing pressure to market themselves to potential students.

A wide-ranging [literature review](#) published earlier this year in the peer-refereed *Review of Educational Research* takes stock of this reality by examining how schools market themselves in different types of choice-based environments, and what the implications may be for issues of equity and academic quality. The article, titled *Marketing and School Choice: A Systematic Literature Review*, is authored by [Ellen Greaves](#), [Deborah Wilson](#), and [Agnes Nairn](#).

Described as the “first-ever systematic literature review of research into the effects of marketing by schools,” the article draws upon 81 English-language papers about studies set in more than a dozen different countries. All included papers were published in peer-reviewed journals and books between 1994 and 2019.

Of central concern is the degree to which competition in choice-based environments leads schools to create (and market) genuinely differentiated or enhanced offerings versus using marketing as a substitute for meaningful improvements.

“The conclusion is that marketing, more often than not, is used as an alternative to making substantive classroom changes,” the review authors write. “Marketing, or ‘promotional ef-

fort,' is relatively risk free and inexpensive . . . compared to substantive change.”

For example, studies in the highly competitive school choice environments of Milwaukee and New Orleans found that principals are much more likely to market or promote their schools' offerings than to change them to better suit their current and potential students.

Of even greater concern, the reviews authors write, “is a group of eighteen papers that present evidence of misleading or deceptive marketing.”

Examples of deception include making subjective claims that can't be verified, over-representing White pupils on the websites of New Orleans schools where almost all the students are Black (perhaps to appeal to White students), and, in one study set in Taiwan,

making unannounced visits to prospective students' parents, bribing teachers at feeder schools to recruit students, forcing students to enroll at a certain school by collecting their diplomas from feeder schools, publishing excellent students' names and photographs without permission, and using bribery to recruit excellent students and then using them as publicity tools.

The reviewers note “the absence of any specific marketing regulations for schools,” suggesting that “[t]his is an issue for the International Chamber of Commerce from which advertising regulations around the world stem.”

The reviewers found that segmentation and targeting were not typically driven by pedagogical needs or equity-related concerns such as targeting certain student groups because they were under-represented in a high-performing school. Rather, they were more often used to “screen, select, or exclude students,” by, for instance, targeting high-achieving students with the goal of boosting the school's average test scores. This is exacerbated by the reality that marketing is most prevalent among schools viewed as being in the bottom of the hierarchy in a highly competitive environment. Because they are struggling to survive, such schools may be more likely to embrace less-than-ethical shortcuts.

The review's authors conclude:

If marketing as currently practiced does not result in curricular enhancement but instead incentivizes social division, then different incentives must be developed that redress the balance, through alternative—-independent, trusted—sources of information and/or regulation of schools' own marketing and information provision. If parents are not receiving objective information about schools, as is suggested by our review, then governments need to find ways to quality control that information to prevent schools' marketing practices from exacerbating social divisions within choice-based education systems.

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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