

First Order Effects of School Choice
Programs:
Research on Academic Achievement
in Vouchers Programs

Christopher Lubienski

University of Illinois

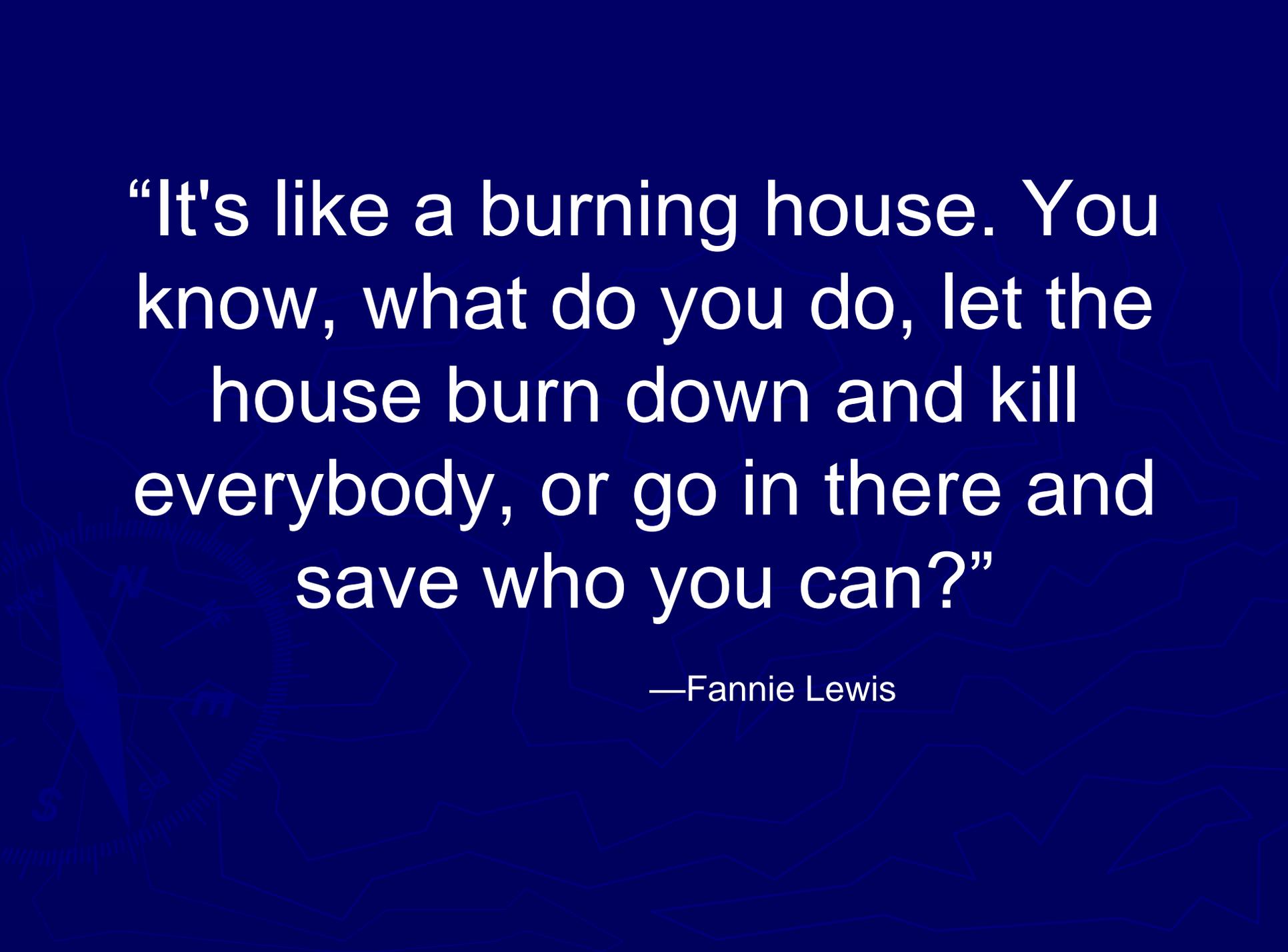
Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland Policy Summit
on Housing, Human Capital, and Inequality

June 28-29, 2012

“...an emerging new civil rights battle for the millennium.”

“public education is not a civil right. What is a civil right is equal access to a quality education for all, which was affirmed by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.”

—Rev. Floyd Flake



“It's like a burning house. You know, what do you do, let the house burn down and kill everybody, or go in there and save who you can?”

—Fannie Lewis

“School choice for poor children
is... today's principal civil rights
fight....

[It is] poor parents trying to
emancipate their children from
the public education plantation.”

—George Will

Research Context

- Previous research finding a “private school effect” (Coleman, et al.; HSB)
- Recent research on school sector and achievement (Peterson, Hoxby)
- “Market theory” and education reform models (Walberg & Bast; Chubb & Moe; Osborne & Gabler; Peterson)

School Sectors & “Market Theory”

- Independent sectors shaped by consumer choice
- Different institutional orientation of organizations in independent sectors
- Attributes of effective independent schools can be brought to bear in the public sector
- Continuing influence of Public Choice Theory in education policy

School Choice Logic Model

<u>INPUTS</u> <i>(Structural Reforms)</i>	>	<u>INTERMEDIARY OBJECTIVES</u> <i>(Transformed Environment)</i>	>	<u>OUTCOMES</u> <i>(Ultimate Goals)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer choice • Provider competition • Deregulation / Decentralized autonomy • Accountability to consumer 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance • Entrepreneurial management • Instructional innovations • Teacher autonomy/ professionalism • Parental / community involvement • Responsiveness to consumer 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement • (Customer satisfaction)

1) What do we know about the effects of school choice, and particularly vouchers, in the US?

2) How do we know this?

3) What is the impact of this knowledge on policy?

Policy Context

- ▶ Residential location (Tiebout)
- ▶ Public school choice (magnets, open-enrollment)
- ▶ Charter schools
- ▶ Private schools (vouchers, tax credits)
- ▶ Home-schooling

Expectations for Choice

- ▶ Innovations in schooling
- ▶ Greater efficiency
- ▶ More equitable opportunities
- ▶ Higher levels of effectiveness

Voucher Studies

- ▶ Publicly funded voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, D.C. Privately funded programs in a number of other metro areas.
- ▶ Difficult to control for unobservable differences between choosers and non-choosers.
- ▶ Random assignment (lottery among voucher applicants) championed as optimal methodology.

Is There a Consensus on Academic Outcomes?

- ▶ Fuller & Robinson review of 27 voucher studies 'which mainly involve peer-reviewed research, by recognized scholars, that has appeared in prestigious journals'
 - claims 'causal link' between choice and improved achievement
 - 3 of 27 studies are peer-reviewed, 2 of those contradict claims.
 - 24 studies produced by PEPG researchers and colleagues
- ▶ Greene reviewed 19 studies on choice outcomes, 8 on voucher achievement.
 - 5 studies found evidence of achievement gains
 - All 5 produced by Greene or PEPG colleagues
- ▶ Reports from Heritage and Friedman Foundations and by University of Arkansas researchers point to similar evidence and make claims of voucher effectiveness.
 - Emphasis on random assignment as 'gold standard' in methodology
 - Note absence of negative effects

A Consensus?

- ▶ Numerous PEPG studies have been heavily critiqued on methodological grounds.
- ▶ PEPG scholars are self-acknowledged advocates for choice and are funded by foundations that support choice.
- ▶ Majority of cited studies are not peer-reviewed and describe limited or inconsistent effects. Advocates have developed own forums and journals.
- ▶ Independent research centers reliant on external funds have blurred public-private lines and put university brands for hire.
- ▶ Active outreach to policymakers and media outlets.

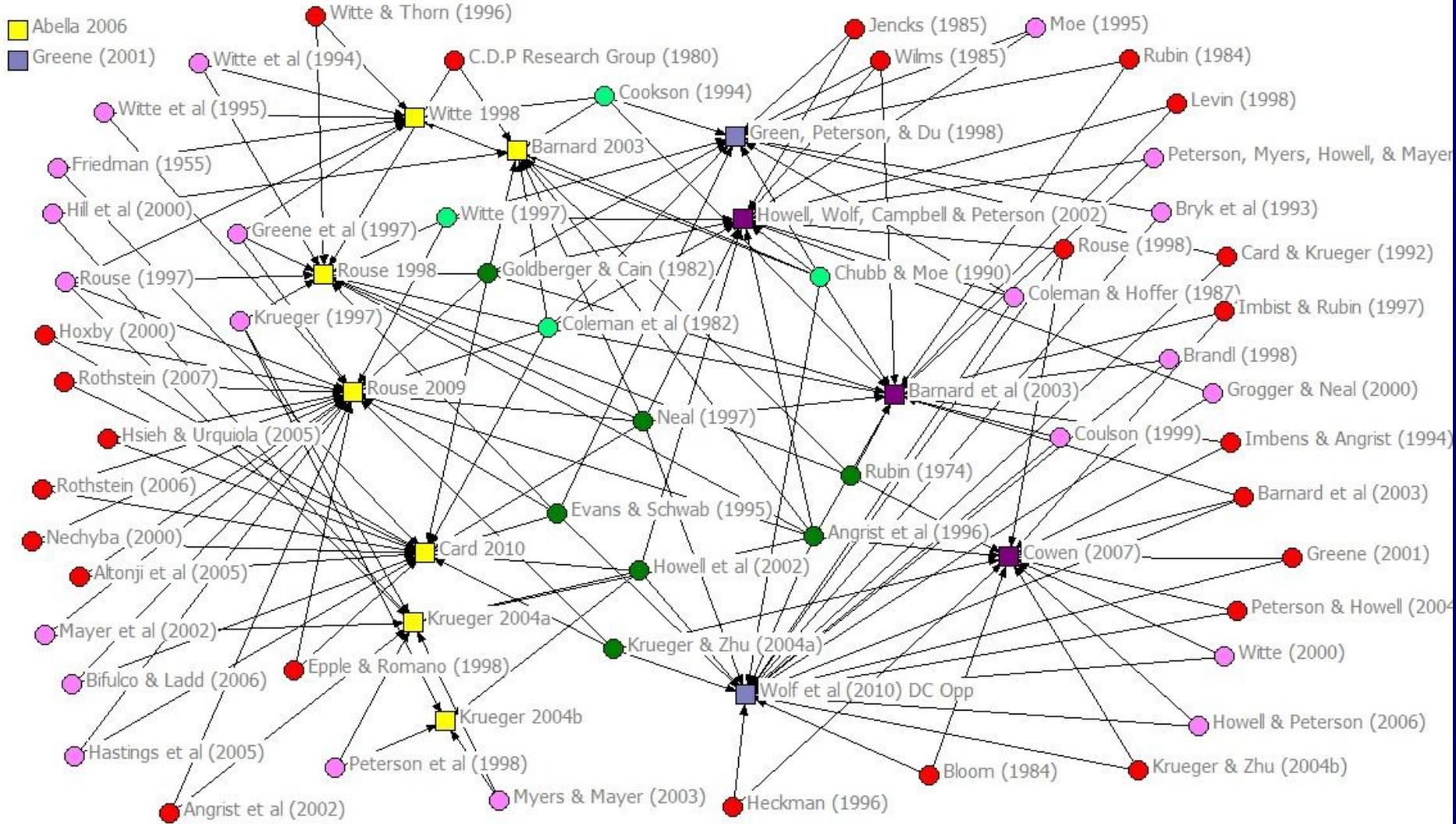
Other Research

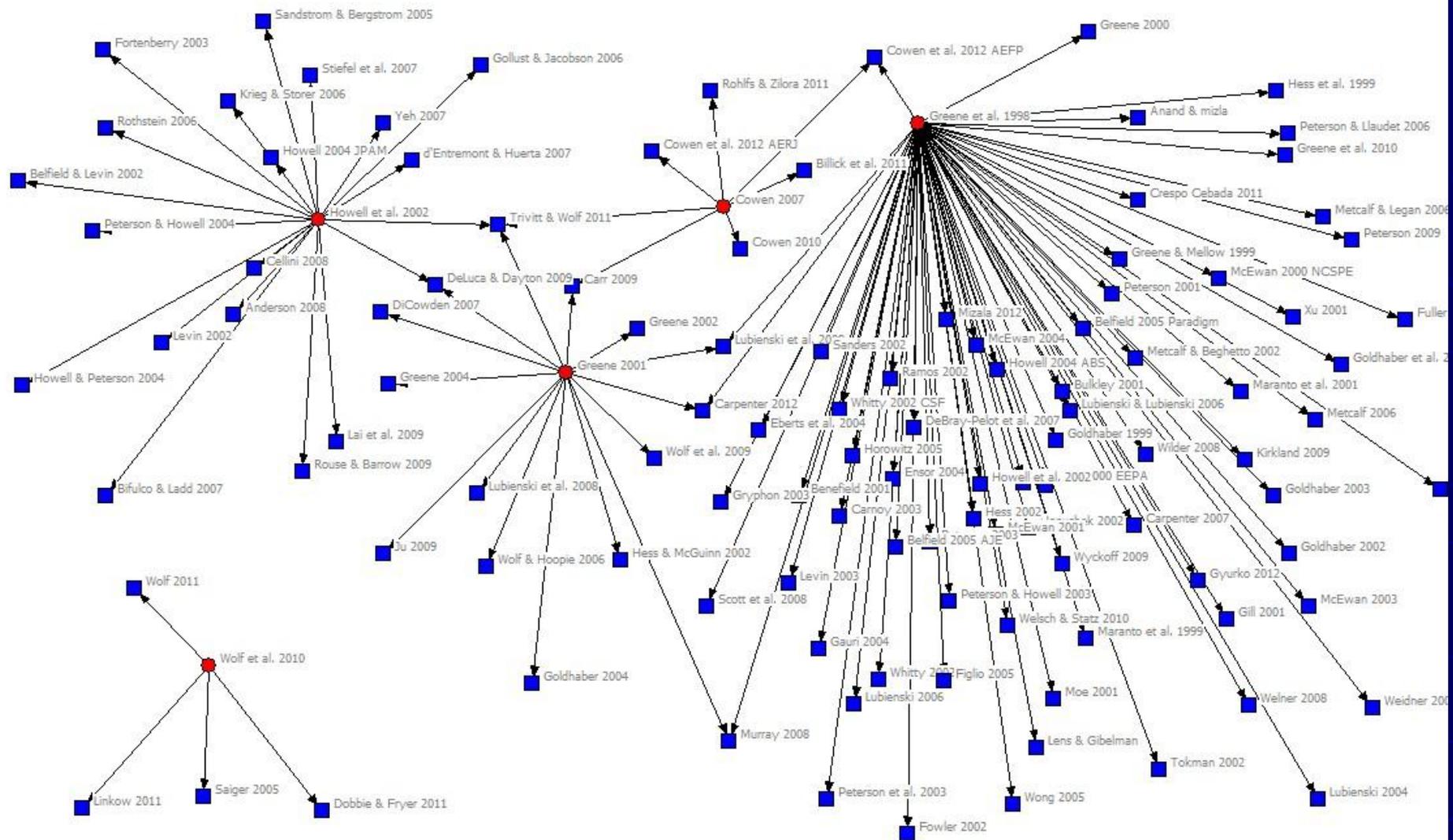
- ▶ Predicted achievement benefits of vouchers or competition are based on superior effectiveness of private schools.
- ▶ Early research on private school effects challenged. Findings indicate no private school benefit in achievement.
- ▶ NELS studies tend to find no or limited private school effect.
- ▶ NAEP studies controversy. Two studies find negative private school effect in math, no effect in reading. PEPG researchers find private school effect.
- ▶ ECLS studies find no or negative private school effects.

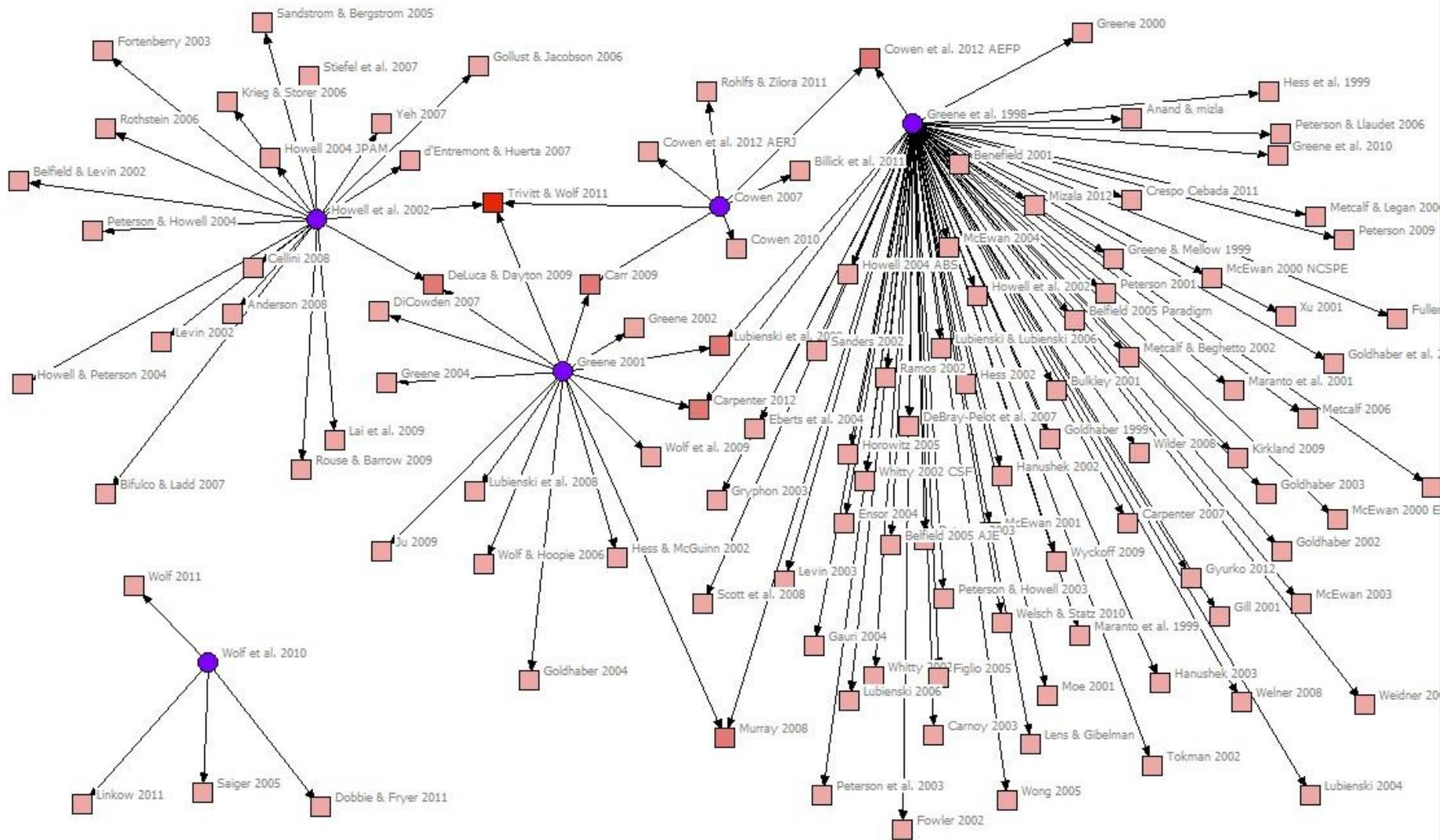
School choice works for the benefit of students, who ought to be the focus of education. Research shows that prior to receiving a voucher, the majority of participating students score well below the national average on standardized tests. Statisticians and educational researchers from Harvard ... conducted a re-analysis of the raw data compiled in an earlier study of the Milwaukee school choice program. They found that choice students benefit academically from the program, showing significant gains in both reading and mathematics by their fourth year of participation. And, according to John F. Witte [and associates], who conducted the initial Milwaukee study, “the parents of ‘choice’ kids are virtually unanimous in their opinion of the program: they love it.”

If school choice becomes the norm in America, it will be Milton Friedman's real legacy and every poor child who is liberated from a failed government school will owe him a lasting debt of gratitude.

— Cal Thomas, *Friedman's Greatest Legacy: School Choice*,







Discussion

- ▶ Voucher programs are based, at least in part, on questionable expectations of improved achievement.
- ▶ Achievement gains as a 'make or break' issue for choice advocates. Symbiotic relationship between choice and test-based accountability.
- ▶ New modes of research production and diffusion.

Discussion

- ▶ Other factors may make choice particularly conducive for this type of advocacy and research, including appeals directly to consumers.
- ▶ Broader public may see criticisms as academic squabbles or statistical nitpicking.
- ▶ High achievement expectations may undermine other functions of choice, by creating incentives for sorting and disincentives for innovation and risk taking.
- ▶ Raises questions about the connection between research evidence and policymaking.

Discussion/Implications

- There is nothing “magical” about private/independent school structure -- Privatization should not be viewed as panacea for failing schools.
- Need to look inside the “Black Box”
- Perhaps changing instruction and assessments have left private schools behind?
- Dangers of greater autonomy (to hire whomever, and teach whatever)
- Persistent, disturbing achievement gaps within schools -- regardless of type
- Dangers of politicized research context