

## Connecting the Dots

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Market Forces: Professor Paul Peterson's Influential Protégés

By Dale Mezzacappa

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## About the Author

Dale Mezzacappa is a Philadelphia writer and a former education correspondent for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

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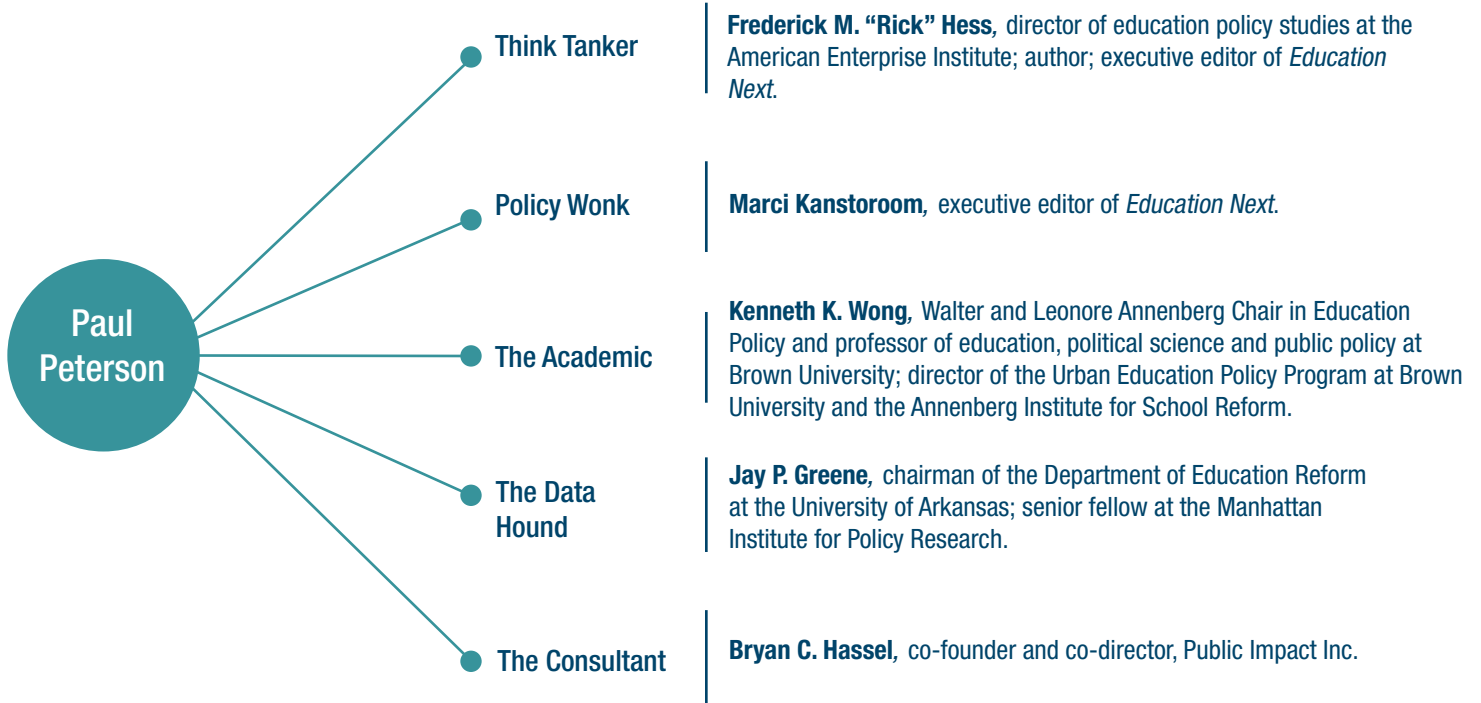
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Harvard professor Paul E. Peterson is best known in education circles as a leading advocate of giving public school students government-funded tuition vouchers to attend private schools. Less well known is his role in training an influential group of young, market-oriented education scholars.



## Introduction

Paul E. Peterson, the Henry Shattuck professor of government at Harvard University, is best known in education circles for his controversial studies on school voucher programs. But Peterson has also played a major role in recruiting and mentoring a new generation of scholars who are making their own mark in education debates. Most of them, like Peterson, are political scientists challenging public education’s core conventions, and most of them, like Peterson, advocate choice, competition, and other market-based reforms.

“A large percentage of the people doing research in education that I would consider outside the mainstream have a connection to Paul,” says Terry Moe, a Stanford University political science

professor and co-author of an influential 1990 study advocating market-based reforms in elementary and secondary education. “They are generally more critical of the existing system and more willing to challenge its basic structure.”

These include people like Moe and John Chubb, Moe’s co-author of *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools* and now a vice president of Edison Schools Inc., a for-profit school management company; Frederick Hess, the director of education policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., and Marci Kanstoroom, both executive editors of *Education Next*, a journal critical of the educational status quo published by Stanford’s Hoover Institution

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that Peterson edits; Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute; Bryan C. Hassel, a private consultant and expert on charter schools; and Kenneth K. Wong, director of the Urban Education Policy Program at Brown University.

Peterson had been a distinguished political scientist well before he began studying school vouchers—at Harvard, in the departments of government and education at the University of Chicago, and as director of governmental studies at the Brookings Institution. Hess, Kanstoroom, Greene, and Hassel studied with Peterson at Harvard, Wong was his student at Chicago, and Moe and Chubb published *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* under Peterson's sponsorship at Brookings.

Earlier in his career, Peterson was known for his scholarship on urban politics and the effect of government policies on the poor. No one was calling him a conservative in those days, though many do now. In his influential 1981 book, *City Limits*, he maintained that city governments are constricted more by their place within the larger political and social order than by internal political struggles and he called for a larger federal role in the delivery of services to poor people. "I consider it a liberal analysis," Peterson says. In his later work, *Welfare Magnets*, he made an even stronger case for nationalizing welfare policy, arguing that poor people moved where benefits were higher. As a result, he says, generous states and cities were penalized, causing states to reduce benefits in a "race to the bottom" so as not to be an attractive place for more poor people. Peterson maintained that cities should not have to choose between an obligation to the poor and serving the middle class.

"He made an argument for a national welfare standard that bothered people in different ways," says Greene. "[Liberals] said the suggestion that low-income people made decisions to maximize benefits was unflattering to the poor. [Conservatives] objected that a national welfare policy was an increase in centralization."

Today, Peterson directs the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) at the Kennedy School, a program he launched in 1996 after seven

years at Harvard. The program has been the source of much of the research conducted on school voucher programs over the past decade. And the program's stance on vouchers isn't hard to discern in its publications. "Parents Satisfied With Private Schools," "Voucher Programs in Three Cities Show Gains for Blacks," and "New Data Counter Old Fears: A Liberal Case for Vouchers" are among the titles of articles in a recent PEPG annual report.

But PEPG also brings together scholars to discuss a variety of education issues. The conferences, on such subjects as desegregation, school finance, and the role of school boards, attract thinkers from across the political and ideological spectrum and result in books edited by Peterson and others that help drive the educational debate.

"Paul performs a convening function at Harvard," says Richard Elmore, a professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and a sometime Peterson critic. "Because he is visible and active, he gets good people to come. He should be praised for that. It often has not much to do with his own research but is about getting issues on the table." Recent colloquia sponsored by PEPG discussed whether parental satisfaction is a valid measure of teacher effectiveness and whether voters hold school boards accountable for the performance of their schools.

## A Respectable Field

Peterson's supporters and critics alike credit him with helping make the study of education a respectable field for political scientists. And several of his students, including Greene and Patrick Wolf, switched from more prestigious political science specialties under Peterson's influence.

"Education policy is on the fringe of political science; there weren't people doing education policy for the most part that I knew in grad school," says Greene, who wrote his dissertation at Harvard on Congress and the presidency. He got involved in education issues after Peterson asked him to help with research on the Milwaukee voucher program. Kanstoroom, who had been studying political philosophy, also became more interested in education research under Peterson's influence. She wrote a dissertation under Peterson that explored

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the question of whether states actually equalize their school finance systems after courts order them to do so.

“He’s a very important scholar,” says Wong, who migrated to education from his interest in bureaucracy and state-federal relations while studying with Peterson in Chicago in the 1980s. “These days, people only look at him as someone who has tried to advocate choice, but he came through a deep and rich intellectual journey and has trained a whole new generation of policy analysts and political analysts.”

Moe and Chubb got support from Peterson to write their book, arguably the most influential modern call for introducing free-market principles into public education. As young assistant professors of political science, they had already started their work when Peterson met them at Stanford while on a fellowship. When he moved on to Brookings, he invited them to continue their research under the auspices of what until then had been known as a fairly liberal think tank.

“He brought us both there, supported our research, and made it OK for Brookings to do research that had pretty conservative implications,” says Chubb. “Paul was critical in making it possible for us to go from junior political scientists to respected leaders in the field in a short period.”

Chubb and Moe’s book made the argument that traditional education reform wasn’t likely to be effective because the politics of school systems get in the way. Their work was partly influenced by Peterson’s *School Politics, Chicago Style* published in 1976. In that book, Peterson looked at how the system actually functioned—how decisions got made on school desegregation, for instance—as school board members and other power brokers juggled the competing demands of unions, politics, ethnic groups, and bureaucracy.

## Crippling Bureaucracy

“Terry and I said the political process will never let you get it right by having unintended consequences, that bureaucracy and unionization cripple schools regardless [of] what reformers say about how to teach reading,” Chubb says. Peterson “encouraged

us to be as radical as we wanted to be. None of that would have happened without Paul. If we had stayed at Stanford, I think it would not have made the splash it did.”

Since the mid-1990s, Peterson has primarily studied vouchers. He describes it as an outgrowth of his earlier work on the politics of urban school systems and the limits of city governments to help their poor and disadvantaged residents.

“I’m an urbanist,” he says. “Educating the next generation...and educating poor kids in big city schools...is really an important area to look into. If we find out vouchers can be a way to improve educational opportunity, I want to know whether that is in fact the case.” Another influence, Peterson says, was sociologist James Coleman. Peterson was at the University of Chicago in the 1960s when Coleman did his studies, still a matter of debate, indicating that low-income students did better in private—at the time mostly Catholic—schools.

Peterson also says that personal experiences played a part in the evolution of his thinking. “When we lived in D.C., our children attended a public school in Northwest Washington, the same one [that President Jimmy] Carter’s daughter [attended]. It proved to be a difficult experience for our children, and we had to quickly look for a private school alternative. We found one in a suburban area, and I did think about the issue of choice in a different way after that.”

Peterson says that his family was able “to solve the problem poor families in the inner city encounter all the time. They can’t do anything about it. I was not going to be a hypocrite after that. I wasn’t going to talk about the need to preserve public education while sending my own kids to private school.” When Peterson moved back to the Boston area to take the Harvard position, he sent his children to public schools in the affluent suburb of Wellesley.

Peterson says “creative destruction” is necessary to promote improvement in settings where elementary and secondary education persistently fails. Good schools can emerge only if talented educators have incentives to create new learning environments and poor performing schools are eliminated. The recreated environment must include private schools, Peterson says. Public schools cannot be expected

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to “repair themselves,” he argues in *Learning From School Choice*, one of the many volumes on choice he has edited or co-edited in recent years.

“I think that the way he looks at it is that over the last 30 years, a lot of strategies have been tried, and he got frustrated with the lack of significant improvement throughout the system,” says Wong, who specializes in studying mayoral takeovers of urban systems and is not a combatant in the voucher debates. “He concluded that there was no way bureaucracy by itself would have a strong enough incentive to really turn itself around, and the way to do it is to create a competitive environment to make the bureaucracy pay attention or lose its power.”

When data from the Milwaukee voucher experiment became available in 1995, Peterson suggested an experimental research design comparing students who applied for and received the vouchers with those who applied but were turned down. University of Wisconsin researcher John Witte had compared the voucher students with a larger sample of students who stayed in public schools and had found little benefit. Peterson found that voucher students pulled ahead of those who declined to use the vouchers in their third and fourth years of private schooling.

Ever since, he has been at the center of fierce debates about the methodology and conclusions of his studies and the delicate line between advocacy and dispassionate fact-gathering. Any effort to sort out the true import of the voucher findings—whether they are strong enough to merit a major policy shift—leads deep into arcane debates on the validity of varying study designs and research decisions, and to a debate about the proper means for publicizing findings.

Peterson’s findings were controversial in part because he wrote articles in the *Wall Street Journal* extolling his findings and the virtues of vouchers before his research had been thoroughly peer-reviewed. It didn’t help that the first *Journal* piece appeared in 1996, just after Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole had endorsed vouchers as an urban school-improvement strategy.

But researchers who have reanalyzed Peterson’s findings from Milwaukee and from studies he has

done of privately funded voucher plans in New York and other cities were less sanguine about the effects of vouchers on student achievement. Princeton economist Alan Krueger, for example, reanalyzed voucher data from New York, Dayton, and Washington, D.C., and concluded that the effects were smaller than Peterson claimed. Peterson and Witte for years debated which findings from Milwaukee were correct.

Moe says he agrees with David Myers of Mathematica Policy Research Inc., who helped Peterson gather data on the privately funded voucher program in New York City. Myers urges caution in interpreting the findings that black students who attended private schools with vouchers did significantly better on reading and math tests than did those who stayed in public schools. He says the results by themselves should not be a reason to endorse vouchers.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration and legislators in many states have cited Peterson’s research in support of a two-year-old federally funded voucher program in Washington, D.C., voucher aid to displaced students in New Orleans, and proposals for state-funded voucher plans.

Peterson’s studies have been funded largely by conservative foundations that have either sponsored private voucher programs themselves or have an interest in seeing them become more widespread. But Peterson rejects the “advocate” label. “I go where the research leads me,” he says, noting that support from foundations interested in a particular reform is common across the ideological spectrum. “Researchers who do work on global warming care about that topic. They care about whether the earth is warming up and why. They do careful research to get an answer on a topic about which they care deeply.”

## Voucher Storm

Peterson’s reasoning is unconvincing to scholars like Henry Levin, head of the Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. “Paul is basically on one side of the issue, a true believer,” Levin who was an early supporter of vouchers now believes the research

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doesn't support their effectiveness. "The people whom he works with and [who] work with him as graduate students know he has a strong view on the subject and gravitate to him on that basis. The ones who come out are not those he has a lot of differences with."

But those who have worked with Peterson see it differently. While controversial, says Hess, Peterson's research "is on the whole certainly much more rigorous than the work the education community traditionally has done." Greene says that despite the naysayers, all the methodologically rigorous studies have shown some positive effect of vouchers, especially for black students.

The voucher storm has not damaged Peterson's standing at Harvard. And his influence, if anything, is growing as his prolific followers continue to produce books, studies, and reports that push the envelope not just on vouchers and choice but on such issues as accountability, private management of public schools, teacher training and compensation, principal licensure, and dropouts. Some, like Wong, Greene, and Moe, have stayed in academia; some, like Hess and Kanstoroom, are at think tanks; and some, like Chubb and Hassel, a charter school consultant, are knee-deep in creating new and different models of urban education.

## Think Tanker

**Frederick M. "Rick" Hess** has built a considerable reputation as a prolific and provocative commentator on education issues. He has been director of education policy studies at the influential and conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., since 2002 and is an executive editor of *Education Next*, a policy journal edited by Paul Peterson and published by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

Unlike many of Peterson's other students, Hess started in education and then broadened his interests to include government. Like John Chubb and Terry Moe, Hess, a former high school teacher and a blunt—and sometimes caustic—critic of public education, believes that tinkering with pedagogy in urban schools does no good in a system that doesn't work bureaucratically or politically. Like

Peterson, he advocates the "creative destruction" of public education through the introduction of new systems of governance and incentives to promote school improvement.

He has devoted a substantial portion of his writings (he has written six books and edited five others, and produced dozens of articles and opinion pieces) to making the case that the credentialing system for principals is outdated, self-defeating, and unrelated to the real needs of schools. He has advocated the hiring of education outsiders "from fields where accountability for performance is part of their everyday working lives," because, he says, "the current approach has fostered a leadership culture that is ill-suited to manage by objective, ill-equipped to implement new technologies, and reluctant to be held accountable for student learning."

And while he agrees that social forces outside of schools make it more difficult for teachers to teach and students to learn, he urges school reformers to focus on what they can improve within the education system. "Social issues such as economic or racial inequality have a tremendous impact on children's opportunities, but it is unhelpful to allow school reform to meander into musings on tax policy, public housing, welfare reform, medical care, or criminal justice," he wrote in his 2004 book, *Common Sense School Reform*. "It is long past time to recapture our schools from the wide-eyed dreamers and to imbue education reform with the simple discipline of common sense."

Hess, an Education Sector nonresident senior fellow, was a student at Harvard's Graduate School of Education when he was introduced to Paul Peterson by Peterson's wife, Carol, who worked at the education school. The two clicked, and after completing his master's degree in education and teaching high school in Baton Rouge, La., Hess went back to Harvard to get a doctorate in government at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, where he earned his Ph.D. under Peterson in 1997. He was, he says, "more comfortable in that intellectual environment," and Peterson was willing "to talk about educational decision-making as a political phenomenon."

Hess has a passion for the politics of education and has devoted much of his career to studying how

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what he calls “policy churn” has rendered school reform ineffective. Reform, especially in urban districts has become a vehicle for satisfying political actors, not a way to improve teaching and learning, he says. He made the argument that politically driven reform was part of the problem rather than the solution in urban school systems in his dissertation, published in 1999 as *Spinning Wheels*.

Hess also believes that educators need outside incentives, including severe consequences, to improve the performance of their schools. After years of studying how principals and teachers respond to different ideas and policies, he has become convinced that it is unproductive to rely on them to motivate themselves to do things differently within the existing system.

“I’m a different kind of scholar than Paul or Jay,” says Hess, referring to Peterson and Greene. “They’re interested in the effects of public policy. I’m more interested in how educators behave and think and react and how schools and school systems operate as institutions.”

## Policy Wonk

**Marci Kanstoroom** was a Harvard graduate student in political philosophy searching for a Ph.D. topic in the early 1990s when she went to Paul Peterson for guidance.

“I was reading Locke and Plato, I loved the great books, but I was struggling to find a dissertation topic,” she says. Peterson at the time was primarily teaching American government and had not yet shifted his full attention to education.

But both were interested in that topic, and they developed a project for Kanstoroom on school finance litigation: whether lawsuits designed to bring more money to impoverished school districts accomplished their goal.

Her research determined that with the exception of a few places like New Jersey, the litigation did not, even when the plaintiffs prevailed in court. “I found that in many instances, after many, many years of court battles, the litigants didn’t have much to show for their efforts,” she says.

As a result of that work, Kanstoroom, who holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from Yale and describes herself as a “lifelong Democrat who has never voted for a Republican in my life,” was hooked on education. “After doing all that research, I knew I wanted to work in that field and learn about what you could do to improve schools for poor kids,” Kanstoroom says. “I read everything I could on it.” Peterson recommended her to work as research director at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C., a think tank headed by Chester Finn, a U.S. Department of Education official in the Reagan administration and a vocal critic of many aspects of American schooling. Her Harvard mentor had left her with a lot of questions about education reform, but she still considered herself a liberal, and she wasn’t sure whether she would find herself in philosophical sync with the conservative Republican.

She realized, however, that her evolving views on education, including her conviction that more resources alone were not enough to solve the problems of underachieving school systems, were moving her into the conservative camp. “I always felt that some [urban] schools were starved of resources, but it was increasingly clear to me that they could not turn themselves around once they got resources,” she says. “There has to be pressure from the outside, so that good money doesn’t follow bad. But when you say money is not the answer, a lot of people close their minds to what else you have to say.”

She also concluded that teacher unions have severely limited the options available to transform schools and that standards, charters, and perhaps even vouchers may be necessary to spur change.

Kanstoroom became interested in exploring the best ways to find school leaders, both teachers and principals. In a 2000 article called *Improving, Empowering, Dismantling*, she and Finn urged policymakers to replace the centralized system of credentialing teachers with a “reformist” model that deregulates the certification process and gives principals power to hire teachers and reward them based on their students’ performance. She also co-authored with Finn and others a research report that looked into what happened to the \$500 million donated to nine urban schools districts by Walter and Leonore Annenberg. Her afterword concluded,



again: “Good intentions and a generous checkbook are clearly not enough to transform American education. Schools also need incentives and standards.”

With Finn, Jay Greene, and Peterson, who by then was heavily engaged on the voucher issue and had founded the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard, she helped start *Education Next*, the provocative quarterly that regularly takes on the education establishment.

Kanstoroom has spent the past few years working part time as an editor at the journal while raising her two young children. As a parent, she says that she is becoming more and more convinced that choice in education is essential. The bottom line “is that it’s fundamentally unfair to force kids to stay in a school that stinks.”

But unlike Peterson, she is more excited about charter schools than about vouchers. “The charter movement is about creating different kinds of schools for a range of kids. They can take the same building, the same funding, and put different kinds of people in charge and set different rules to play by. They can create different roles for principals and teachers and change the way the day and year is organized. They can do a lot of neat things.”

Yet, she says, “the problems of the kids left behind are so immense, we need to throw everything we can at them—private schools, charters, and trying to fix the traditional public schools where they are.”

## The Academic

**Kenneth K. Wong** began his political science career interested in the interrelationships of federal, state, and local governments. He wrote his dissertation under Paul Peterson at the University of Chicago in the early 1980’s on how cities use federal aid in housing, community development, and education to help the poor. A portion of his research focused on Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Great Society legislation that sought to help the nation’s disadvantaged students. And like Peterson, research on urban policy and poverty led him deeper into education, which has been the focus of his work for the past 15 years.

## More Peterson Protégés

**Christopher Berry**, assistant professor in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago; specializes in political economy and urban school systems. He served a two-year post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard under Peterson.

**David E. Campbell**, assistant professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame specializing in education policy, religion and politics, and political participation. Peterson served as his doctoral adviser at Harvard.

**Martin West**, research fellow under Peterson at the Program on Education Policy and Government at Harvard expecting to complete his doctorate this year; research fellow at the Brookings Institution; research editor, *Education Next*. Recently appointed to the faculty of the Urban Education Policy Program at Brown University; Peterson protégé Kenneth K. Wong heads the program.

**Patrick Wolf**, associate professor of public policy at the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute; lead investigator of Washington, D.C., voucher program; studied under Peterson at Harvard. Recently appointed to the faculty of the education policy center at the University of Arkansas’s College of Education and Health Professions; hired by Peterson protégé Jay P. Greene, the center’s director.

Now, after teaching at Chicago and the Peabody School of Education at Vanderbilt University, Wong is establishing a new master’s degree program in education policy at the Annenberg Center for School Reform and Brown University.

Wong credits Peterson with prodding him to think about how cities function, how politicians and bureaucrats clash, and how policies are actually carried out. Like Peterson, he has concluded that public school systems need external pressure to

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dislodge long-term beliefs and habits that undermine their educational mission, such as assigning and compensating teachers almost entirely based on seniority. But while Peterson and most of his Harvard students have seized on choice and competition from private schools as the best—if not the only—way to do that, Wong has focused on the role of mayors in school governance.

The more I study mayors and schools, I see that they are looking at education as a quality-of-life issue,” Wong says. “That’s why I’m becoming more and more interested. They want to use education as a way to improve neighborhood institutions, and [they] see schools as an opportunity to reinvest in human capital.” He says that he is finding “more and more evidence” that giving mayors more power over school systems can have positive effects. Mayors help prioritize limited resources and mediate between the demands of interest groups and the needs of the entire district, he says.

Wong says that Peterson helped him understand the “division of institutional power in a complex system” as well as the moral dilemma that city governments face.

“There is this tension between the fact that cities have to be efficient in the use of resources to keep the middle class and the redistributive, moral obligation to take care of disadvantaged residents,” he says. “That tension continues to influence how I think.” In 1986, he published a book with Peterson and Barry G. Rabe called *When Federalism Works* that explored this tension.

Wong says that political scientists are more willing than sociologists, but somewhat less willing than economists, to advocate more radical ideas for educational change. He says that even his position has stirred controversy because it assumes that school systems need outside intervention to right themselves.

“Within the educational research community, [mayoral control] is a foreign concept,” Wong says. “A lot would not agree with me that mayors can make a difference. They will put their faith within the existing organization itself. I can see that Paul has gone through an even more dramatic process in terms of dealing with the skeptics and critics.”

At Brown, he will have the chance to train a new generation of analysts and thinkers. But the idea of the new program, a joint project of the Annenberg Institute and Brown’s Department of Education, is to integrate theory and practice.

“We’re providing a different kind of training,” he says—a one-year program for students who intend to move into foundations, school district central offices, state legislatures, and other roles in education policy. The program’s faculty includes Martin West, the research editor at *Education Next*, who is completing his doctorate at Harvard under Peterson.

## The Data Hound

Shortly after Paul Peterson asked him in 1995 to help analyze data from a school voucher program in Milwaukee, **Jay P. Greene**, then an assistant professor of government at the University of Houston, decided that he would shift his academic specialty to education, even though it was not a particularly prestigious pursuit for a political scientist.

Greene earned a bachelor’s degree in government from Tufts University in 1988 and a doctorate in government in 1995 from Harvard, where he wrote his dissertation on conflicts between the legislative and executive branches of government. He had worked with Peterson there, but not on education-related issues.

But his voucher research with Peterson, he says, “gave me an opportunity to work on an exciting project and whet my appetite for education policy research. I’d always been interested in education, but I received signals in my training that it wasn’t something I should get too interested in. Eventually, I decided I didn’t care.”

Since then, Greene has made a name for himself challenging public education’s conventional wisdom as a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin and as a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Public Policy, a New York City-based think tank that embraces market-based solutions in public policy.

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A prolific writer and researcher, he has produced some two dozen reports and over 100 opinion pieces since 2000 on a wide range of education issues. In his 2005 book, *Education Myths: What Special Interest Groups Want You to Believe About Our Schools—and Why It Isn't So*, Greene challenges notions that more money produces better schools, smaller classes improve educational outcomes, teachers are underpaid, teacher licensing produces higher-quality teachers, and high-stakes testing distorts and limits instruction—“myths” that he says are promoted by teachers unions and other special interests in public education. Greene has also produced widely publicized studies on the haphazard way states and school districts determine high school graduation rates, work that was instrumental in getting the National Governors Association to develop standards for such calculations, and he has worked on special education, student-promotion policies, and bilingual education.

“I’m interested,” he says, “in ways to restructure the incentives in our education system that might improve educational outcomes. That includes things like expanding school choice, accountability testing, and exit exams.”

But Greene has written most widely on school choice. He has participated in studies of vouchers in Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C., and maintains that the research from those studies is “consistently positive.” The studies “all point in the same direction, which is that there are benefits to students who participate in voucher programs, at least African-American students.” In Florida, he also studied whether the threat of losing students through vouchers caused public schools to improve at a faster rate than schools not facing that threat, and concluded that they did. All in all, Greene says, research on vouchers is more compelling than that on charter schools. “There are not very strong findings [of educational gains] out of charter school participation,” he says. “I think the effect for vouchers is larger.”

Greene has his critics. Some researchers suggested that he was too quick in Florida to discount other possible explanations for the improvement in the public schools he studied, such as the mere possibility of being stigmatized with two consecutive

F ratings under Florida’s accountability system. And Richard Colvin, director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media and an Education Sector nonresident senior fellow, called *Education Myths* a “selective and unconvincing” analysis of education research in a review of the book in the *Los Angeles Times*. “Anyone who appoints himself a mythbuster also, implicitly at least, claims to be an unbiased arbiter of evidence,” Colvin wrote. “Jay P. Greene, an ardent believer in the salutary effects of competition and privatization on education, is hardly that.”

Like Peterson, Greene, who describes himself as a Democrat, says that his is not a conservative agenda. Amid rapid change in the way educational services are delivered, he argues, traditional labels hold no meaning. He says that Peterson “has been quite consistent in the social agenda that drives his research interests,” which includes work on the urban underclass, welfare reform, and putting greater emphasis on programs for children rather than the elderly. “It would be hard to characterize that agenda as conservative,” Greene says, “nor is it fair to label me that way.”

Greene last year took an endowed chair to establish the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas’s College of Education and Health Professions—where he just recruited another Peterson protégé, Patrick Wolf of Georgetown University.

## The Consultant

**Bryan C. Hassel** went to the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard in 1993, after a year at Oxford University in England as a Rhodes scholar, with the intention of studying antipoverty programs. But he became discouraged by the results of many job-training initiatives and other programs that sought to intervene directly in the lives of impoverished adults. Fighting poverty, he concluded, required starting earlier, with the school-aged.

While Hassel was at Harvard, Paul Peterson founded the Program in Education Policy and Governance, a joint project between the Kennedy School and the university’s government department. When Hassel decided to write his doctoral dissertation on charter schools, Peterson became a natural person to ask for advice.

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Hassel says Peterson was skeptical that charter schools could maintain the independence from the public school bureaucracy that Peterson saw as crucial to offering parents real choices. “He created a challenging environment for me to think about charters and what it would take to make them work as a policy reform,” Hassel says. “He encouraged me to think about the threats to the effectiveness of charters as a reform.”

Hassel’s dissertation was ultimately published in 1999 as *The Charter School Challenge*. Half the book dealt with legislative threats to charter school success, the other half with implementation threats. Hassel, who is an Education Sector nonresident senior fellow, moved swiftly from studying charter schools to helping them succeed. In 1996, even before he received his doctorate under Peterson, he and his wife, Emily Ayscue Hassel, formed Public Impact, a North Carolina-based educational consulting company.

The firm primarily advises state and local officials and organizations on the conditions necessary for creating successful charter schools. It has worked for four years with Mayor Bart Peterson of Indianapolis, the only mayor in the country with the power to authorize charters. Public Impact helped Indianapolis design the city’s charter application process, select operators, set high standards for them, and decide how to disseminate information about the program to parents and the public. Public Impact, Hassel says, also helps Indianapolis recruit individuals and organizations to start charter schools. There are currently 13 charter schools in Indianapolis, serving 5 percent of the city’s students.

The company also works to improve the performance of others empowered to grant charters, such as school systems and universities. It has had contracts with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers to help them develop technical resources and national standards.

Hassel is also doing a lot of work on how to turn around chronically low-achieving schools. No Child Left Behind and many state policies require drastic measures to restructure public schools that don’t improve. While there isn’t yet a lot of knowledge about what to do with schools in their seventh or eighth year of failure, Hassel says, there’s a

lot of knowledge from other fields on successful organizational turnarounds. Again, he said it boils down to leadership. “We know what kinds of leaders are likely to be successful,” he said. “Getting those kinds of people to take tough assignments and giving them leeway is a proven area for change. After 12 to 15 years of chartering, we know how to do that well.”

Hassel and his wife, parents of two school-age children, have also shared the lessons they’ve learned about school choice with another group—parents. They have written a series of “how to” books for parents to help them navigate the dizzying new world of educational options. Called the “picky parent guides,” the inexpensive kits and books are primers on how parents can look beyond test scores to determine which school is the right “fit” for their child. Hassel envisions a day when parent teams produce *Consumer Reports*-like reviews on schools.