



Snapshots Vs. Trends in School Testing

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



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Saint Louis's Paideia Academy, a charter school, is [set to close its doors](#) following a recent defeat in a court battle with Missouri's Board of Education, which rejected the school's charter application earlier this year. The [Post-Dispatch reports](#) that the Board of Education, in rejecting the application, and the Cole County Circuit Judge, in upholding its decision, cited poor management, the lack of a sponsor, and low test scores as reasons to revoke the charter. Although I am not in a position to speak about the quality of management, or about the lack of a sponsor (which certainly seems like a valid reason to revoke a charter), I do, however, object to the "low test score" argument on two grounds.

First, although it is true that Paideia's test scores rank among the lowest in the state, absolute measures of test scores are not a very meaningful measure of school quality. The production of education is similar to the production of anything else in the economy: Poorer quality inputs, in the form of poorer students from historically disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds, translate to poorer quality outputs, in the form of test scores. It's not only a mistake, then, to compare Paideia's students to those of high-performing districts, but also to an arbitrary benchmark determined by the state. Taking a snapshot of test scores is not enough, because a reliance on mere glimpses into time discourages an understanding of

the underlying trends at work. The more important measure is the longitudinal one: Are Paideia's students learning more now than they were before the school existed? Perhaps the answer is no, but it doesn't look like this question was considered by either the Board of Education or the Cole County Circuit Judge.

Second, I am willing to believe that we may overvalue test score measures of all kinds. One-size-fits-all models don't work in schools, where abilities and interests vary greatly between student populations. Schools that produce less significant test score gains but more significant "creativity" gains may still be cultivating meaningful human capital.

About the Author



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