



Institute for Objective Policy Assessment (IOPA)

A 'NEED' EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

26+ Important Niches that IOPA Can Fill

Dr. John Merrifield, IOPA President (IOPACHief@policytalk.org)

8/29/23

EXPANDED WITH EXPLANATORY COMMENTS

A) **The IOPA Strategy**: Package diverse, well-researched perspectives into objective *assessments*; analysis plus informed, civil disagreement, and online discussion at policytalk.org.

We need new scholars to explore new ideas in new ways. Groupthink and 'Not Invented Here' are common, serious impediments to new ideas. *We find ourselves in dangerous circumstances despite those think tanks' best efforts, and because of some of those efforts.*

To gain resources, traction, and attention, IOPA must identify important overlooked and botched issues (see below) AND assess policy issues in more useful ways.

B) **K-12 School System Reform (SSR)**: My 2022 update of a 2019 book describes many serious knowledge gaps. We must identify more school system outcome determinants: Too much variance is still unexplained.

The best available model explains only 40% of the differences in school system (all schools, public and private) performance. IOPA needs to lead the way in improving that. It's information that we need to achieve higher-performing school systems.

C) **Scandals attributed to chartered public schools**: insufficient understanding jeopardizes SSR;

Because no amount of money will make one schooling strategy - for example, the uniformly comprehensive schooling strategy of public school systems - fit all, universal school choice on a level playing field with the public schools is a necessary governance and funding reform. Chartering is seen as the predominant form of school choice expansion, which means the scandals seen in chartering - probably the result of shortages (waitlists) of charter slots - if not adequately explained as resulting from restrictions on choice and anti-market aspects of charter law, could undermine public support for non-trivial school choice expansion.

D) **SSR relevance/need for price system signals and incentives**: the only alternative to price system determination of what's taught, how, and to whom is the ongoing central planning failure. Assigned public schools have been especially bad for the least advantaged. And zero admission price schooling is a costly delusion that concentrates poverty near the worst schools.

IOPA will leave school system central plan optimization (curricula design, textbook specs and selection, teacher training standards, etc.) to others; a very full niche. IOPA will focus on governance and funding policies including especially facilitating a role for entrepreneurial initiative in developing alternatives to public schools. To help motivate and support that, IOPA needs to assert the importance of price (such as tuition and

teacher pay) formation and adjustment in determining what is taught, how, where, and to whom, by the alternatives to public schools.

E) Income Inequality: We need much greater recognition that income mobility determines whether significant income inequality is great, or worthy of some concern. Income quintile inequality is dangerously misleading. Also, the cost and benefits of forced redistribution need more attention.

Income inequality concerns have led to calls for severely debilitating restrictions on economic activity. Such concerns could be tragic misinterpretations of income data.

F) Abused, neglected children: We need to [eliminate the shortages](#) of desperately needed services.

This arose as an IOPA issue from personal experience with adopted boys whose behavior was profoundly and adversely affected by foster care neglect and abuse. When we needed services for them, and to protect me and my wife from dangerous behaviors, we were confronted by a long waitlist, which left the boys untreated and wife/husband in danger or forced to abandon them back into the system. The only way to prevent persistent shortages is through a price system, which would have to look a lot different than the naturally occurring price formation and adjustment for ordinary goods and services.

G) Risk Comparison: The pandemic reminded us that the political process needs to address the risk du jour alongside risks created by responses to the risk du jour.

We need a combination of traditions and rules that yields holistic assessment of policy-making risks; that deters elevating of new risks over others.

H) Audit of Climate Change Debate: Because “getting climate change policy wrong will be very costly,” we must reconcile the highly credentialed, diverse positions. See this [extensive preliminary assessment](#). Especially, no-regrets paths to GHG reduction need to be given much more attention.

High costs, highly credentialed diverse perspectives, and a high level of inertia and uncertainty make this issue among the most important in which IOPA can have an immediate, significant impact. Very important facts are routinely absent from low- and high-level debates of how to address concern about climate change effects.

I) Managed Trade: There may be more government intervention into international trade, which had better get us to do it much better, including much more out in the open.

There are spurious arguments for restricting trade with foreign firms and consumers. Such arguments aim to use the government to cripple foreign-based competition. IOPA will lend a hand in resisting such arguments for government intrusion into willing buyer – willing seller relationships. But the key role for IOPA is to improve government oversight and management of trading relationships that could create legitimate national security risks; for example, many strategic materials for weapons and medicines are found predominantly in rival nations such as China and Russia.

J) Voter Fatigue: Long ballots exacerbate low information voting, which yields low/no public accountability political control situations. To set up reforms, much awareness-raising needed.

The effects of accountability to voters are very likely profoundly affected by how much we expect voters to cast informed votes on. We need a much better grasp of the effects of over-reliance on what appears, in many places, to be an over-extended electorate, which would yield dangerous imagined accountability to the

general public and actual increased empowerment of special interests. A lot to vote on is also a possible factor in vote suppression and turnout.

K) Central Planning Failure: need more attention to specific instances, and the general concept.

The natural process that decides what the economy makes, how, where, and for whom is free enterprise informed and motivated by market-based price formation and adjustment. The only alternative to that – central planning through government-approved experts – is surprisingly pervasive in the USA, and typically the source of major problems. IOPA will highlight central planning failure as it exists in the USA and offer well-vetted routes away from that huge source of dysfunction and potential tyranny.

L) Improving equity through price decontrol of K-12 schooling: assigned public schools have been especially bad for the least advantaged. And zero admission price schooling is a costly delusion.

The political process's longstanding equitable access to schooling strategy is 'free' (no tuition) uniformly comprehensive public schools. That has been a disaster ("Nation at Risk"), especially for the least economically advantaged among us, in part because 'free' schooling has been a costly delusion, and because large comprehensive schools are especially likely to be a poor fit for children from lower income families. When schools don't charge tuition, housing markets do. Homes cost more near the better public schools. IOPA will propose alternate equity strategies and thoroughly vet them.

M) Political control of K-12 schooling: An in the weeds look at how such control actually proceeds.

The ultimate result of this exploration process through IOPA is insight into the 'sausage factory' (google) process that produces public school system policies; hypothesized to be quite different from the romanticized version of competing interests working together. That will allow for a better-informed choice between school systems that financially advantage the assigned schools, and systems that do not discriminate against children for whom the assigned school is a poor fit.

N) Health Care: To avoid the single-payer impact on availability and quality, we need to explore still-very-efficient, kinder-gentler-appearing strategies for maximizing coverage and access.

We see from the world's many single-payer health care systems that the concept is very popular, even when the concept in practice has major problems that are inescapable because of political inertia. Hence, it behooves countries to identify more efficient ways to meet the promise of universal access to care before being trapped, politically, in a system that has major shortages of services for major injuries or illnesses.

O) Disaster Response: We need to develop a more efficient, still politically correct attitude toward price change in a disaster aftermath. So-called 'price gouging' is a serious virtuous language police issue.

Not only do price control laws constitute civil rights violations, it's inefficient to rely on methods other than market-based price adjustment to cope with natural disaster aftermaths. Because of low economic literacy, and because it seems mean to charge a lot more than usual for things folks seem to desperately need after events such as floods and earthquakes, many states have enacted 'price gouging' laws. Such laws attack the private property right to only sell property at a price acceptable to the owner, and such laws create shortages that slow disaster recovery. Capping price increases reduces supply and imposes 'first-come-first-served until it runs out,' which creates competition among consumers that often yields unsafe, and perhaps violent actions. IOPA will

devise disaster recovery policies that let price adjustments prevent shortages and accelerate supply recovery without running afoul of anti-price gouging sentiments.

- P) Accountability Perspectives: Well-aligned incentives, and sunshine as the best ‘disinfectant,’ applied, everywhere, and for sure to educators, students, public intellectuals, think tanks, and policymakers as part of K-12 reform. IOPA’s dedication to accountability arose from Myron Lieberman’s prescient observation (p 292 of *Educational Morass* - 2007) that:

“As long as no negative consequences follow even egregiously mistaken credence goods [trusted information and analysis sources], better policies are improbable.”

The need to discredit weak analysis has a flip side; the need to contest cancel culture.

Many destructive accidental and deliberate sources of poor advice and misinformation escape accountability for the devastation they often cause. IOPA will lead exploration of ways to legitimately hold trusted information sources accountable for reckless and egregious assertions of trustworthy analyses.

- Q) Use of public school attendance zones concentrates and exacerbates urban poverty: the school choice expansion targeted-to-all-of-the-residents-of-poor-areas-remedy is a school system reform Plan B.

Families compete in housing markets to be near the better assigned schools. That concentrates the poorest families near the worst schools. Through universal school choice expansion, or at least universal choice expansion targeted to just the poorest places we can keep some middle/upper income families from leaving poorer areas, and even motivate middle/upper income relocations to poorer areas. That yields economic development of persistently poor areas, and the targeted version introduces school choice expansion (Plan B) to cities in states where untargeted universal choice expansion is not a politically viable school choice expansion starting point.

- R) Comprehensive re-examination of a Universal Basic Income: many never examined aspects.

Even classical liberal (very conservative) icon Milton Friedman got over his initial abhorrence of guaranteeing an income even to able-bodied loafers. The right questions are: 1) Is there a UBI policy that is superior to what is done now in the name of a social safety net; and 2) Can we rely on the political process to create and maintain such versions of a UBI policy? IOPA will address those.

- S) Putting the ‘Loyal’ back into Loyal Opposition: discourage putting party over general welfare.

Not only is political party over country behavior disheartening, it can also be very costly. IOPA will address this issue by seeing if such behavior seems to vary within republican forms of government, and then devise ways to motivate public officials to diminish such costly behavior, maybe even applaud/ support good policy even when it originated with the opposition political party.

- T) Eviction bans: the ultimate disaster for renters; an example of a transition gains trap issue.

The basic economics says eviction bans and rent controls are a disaster for the vast majority of renters. Both reduce the supply of housing, which makes renting more expensive. That, and reduced availability of rental housing increases the demand for owned housing, which in markets where building new homes is restricted by policy or geography. The large gains to some renters, and some homeowners and builders creates a case in point of a transition gains trap, which is an important general concept for IOPA to address; important because inefficient policies are often reform-resistant because of the people that benefit from them.

U) Crony Capitalism Index: only with quantification can that poison be adequately attacked.

The process of devising a credible quantification method, and the comparisons that the Index values facilitate, are an essential part of making the critical distinctions between the open free enterprise process that has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and the politically rigged process wherein political influence cripples actual and potential competitors of favored firms (owned by cronies of government officials). Failure to clarify, with outreach, that distinction endangers the golden goose of open free enterprise.

V) When less choice is better: for example, congestion tolls should apply to all highway lanes. Related to that, IOPA can chart a course to well-crafted, politically viable congestion fees and tolls.

Choice is typically good – for example, see the Milton Friedman book and video series, [Free to Choose](#) – but there are important exceptions, which makes them important subjects of IOPA research and outreach.

W) When competition can be harmful: for example, cities competing for sports teams or new firms.

Likewise, competition is typically an efficiency-improving process, but there are important exceptions, which makes them important subjects of IOPA research and outreach.

X) A Virtuous Language Police: an in-process book-to-be and an IOPA commitment to polite, informed condemnation of misleading uses of key terms.

Y) Persuasion tactics applied to opposition that didn't arrive at the opinions through evidence/logic.

In part because of “Nation at Risk” low-performing K-12 school systems, and overwhelmingly liberal university faculty that go beyond ideological imbalance and suppress open inquiry, a lot of voters and public officials believe and assert things devoid of a foundation in evidence or logic. That many of them are well-meaning gives us a starting point in devising and applying the strategy we need to deprogram the mis-educated and under-educated activists and voters.

Z) Fiscal Sustainability: a consensus among the well-informed says that the fiscal practices – failure to budget – of the federal government and many states (e.g. Illinois) are unsustainable, which means they will end. How they end is immensely important in several dimensions, which is the IOPA fiscal practices niche.

Part of the IOPA mission is to vastly increase the number of well-informed on this issue. Even among the highly educated, very few are aware of the proximity and depth of the [fiscal cliff](#). Through caps on spending growth, budgeting can be re-established even before spending and revenue are equal.