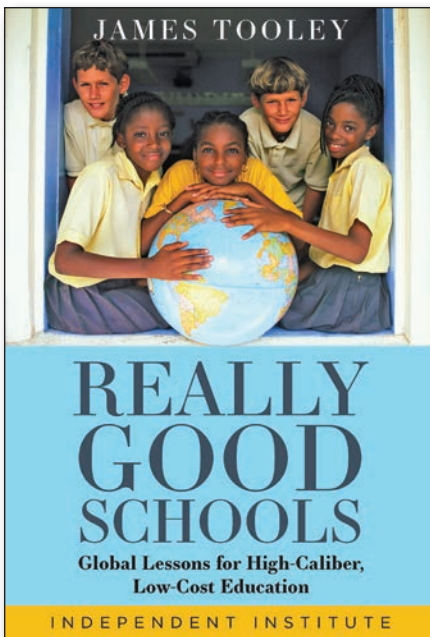


Really Good Schools:

Global Lessons for High-Caliber, Low-Cost Education

BY JAMES TOOLEY



424 Pages | 6 x 9 | Index
5 Figures | 16 Tables
Hardcover: \$29.95
ISBN: 978-1-59813-338-7
Published: April 12, 2021

Independent Institute
100 Swan Way
Oakland, CA 94621-1428

Phone: 510-632-1366
Fax: 510-568-6040
Toll-Free: 800-927-8733
Online: www.independent.org
Email: info@independent.org

Book Highlights

- **A quiet revolution in education is taking place throughout the developing world: the astounding growth of low-cost private schools.** Found even in the poorest regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, these schools now educate 70 percent or more of urban schoolchildren, including those on the poverty line, and a large minority (perhaps 30 percent) of rural children. Often flying below the radar of government officials and international aid groups, the schools are ubiquitous, but often hard to detect unless one is willing to take personal risks and venture forth into some of the most troubled regions and neighborhoods on the planet.
- **No one has done more to uncover, document, and investigate the global upsurge of low-cost private schooling than James Tooley (“the Indiana Jones of education policy”), who has traveled to four continents and 22 countries (and counting) in his intrepid quest to understand this revolutionary development.** Tooley’s estimates are eye-opening: Sub-Saharan Africa probably has 74 million students in low-cost private schools. One state of Nigeria, Lagos State, probably has 14,000 such schools. India alone may have 450,000 low-cost private schools teaching 92 million students. And contrary to what many education officials might expect, children in these schools outperform their counterparts in public schools, even after controlling for background variables and selectivity bias.
- **Once entrepreneurs introduce low-cost private schools in America, a process of improvement, innovation, competition, and growing adoption would likely cause prices to fall even lower, as in other industries.** Philanthropy and targeted assistance could further widen accessibility, making some private schools affordable to all. Market research in poor suburbs of Philadelphia found that for parents not currently sending their kids to private schools, 90 percent would consider private schools if this option were within their budget, especially at an annual fee of \$1,500 to \$3,000 spread over multiple payments.
- **The global revolution shows that private education alone is capable of offering educational opportunities for all.** This revelation should prompt us to rethink not only the role of public education in the developing world, but also in developed nations. It also calls into question the existing framework of education, including government regulation of curriculum, assessment, certification, and more broadly the structure and organization of schooling.



Contents

Acknowledgments

List of Figures and Tables

Introduction

Part I: A Global Revolution

1. Ubiquity and Affordability
2. Quality and Value for Money
3. Equity and Choice
4. Sustainability and the Rise of Educational Entrepreneurs
5. Education and Domination

Part II: Reclaiming the Framework of Education

6. Great Expectations
7. The Unbearable Burden of Learning
8. Five Problems in Search of a Solution
9. A Thought Experiment in Educational Freedom
10. A New Measure of Education

Part III: Off to America

11. Some Problems with American Education
12. The Theory and Practice of School Vouchers
13. Why Milton Friedman Changed His Mind
14. Two Types of School Choice
15. Education as Spontaneous Order

Notes

Bibliography

Index

About the Author

Synopsis

Aspexer is haunting the developing world—the specter of low-cost, privately owned schools.

Spreading into every corner of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America, this grassroots revolution is bringing education to communities ill served by traditional government-run, government-financed schools.

And while it has fierce critics—an alliance of academics, international aid agencies, and teachers’ unions—this movement is by all measures a success. Low-cost private schools are ubiquitous, truly affordable, and high quality. They are fair to girls and other disadvantaged groups. And they are the clear, well-informed preference of the parents who choose them over the standard government model.

The leading field researcher and explainer of this global revolution, **James Tooley**, first revealed it to book audiences in his 2009 exposé, *The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey into How the World’s Poorest People Are Educating Themselves*—a work that earned him the Sir Antony Fisher International Memorial Award and the moniker, “the Indiana Jones of education policy” (Andrew Coulson, author of *Market Education: The Unknown History*). In the ensuing years, Tooley continued his globe-trotting research, exploring low-cost private schools in a total of 22 countries (so far) on four continents.

In his latest book, *Really Good Schools: Global Lessons for High-Caliber, Low-Cost Education*, Tooley offers updated observations on the phenomenon of low-cost private schools and goes two steps further, challenging the standard framework of education (for curriculum and assessment, compulsory attendance, and even the institution of public schooling) as well as showing what it would take for the United States (a leader in so many fields, but a laggard in educational delivery and achievement) to enjoy a re-

naissance in K-12 education.

American public school reform, school vouchers, and charter schools, Tooley notes, have been hamstrung by organized interests and bureaucratic fumbling. And even where successful they get us nowhere beyond the “suppliant model,” wherein parents must ask (or beg) policymakers for a moderately greater degree of educational independence (although usually for naught). The most promising way forward, therefore, is to push for full educational independence by encouraging entrepreneurs to emulate their counterparts in the developing world and introduce their own models of low-cost private schools. That path, Tooley explains, is surprisingly open, with many states offering few regulatory hurdles and several large cities offering additional characteristics that make them especially ripe for the first cohort of what could easily become a large wave of low-cost private schools.

Enlightening, inspiring, and programmatic, *Really Good Schools* not only shows what’s happening in affordable private education around the world and why. It also shows that students’ academic success and life prospects need not be held hostage to bureaucratic inertia, vested interests, and chronic underperformance. Educational independence is already giving millions of the world’s poorest families new opportunities for social and economic advancement. Now it’s time for the entrepreneurs to apply these lessons throughout North America, the United Kingdom, and the rest of the developed world.

A Global Revolution

Really Good Schools is divided into three sections, with part I cataloguing our current state of knowledge about this phenomenon. When Tooley first plowed this ground in the early 2000s, he was virtually alone in researching the topic. Although hundreds of researchers, activists, philanthropists, entrepreneurs and investors have since

become active in the field, Tooley has both synthesized their findings and conducted original research. A key discovery of his analysis is that the low-cost private schooling model scores high on seven key metrics essential for any development program: scalability/ubiquity, affordability, quality, value for money, equity, choice, and sustainability.

Tooley's research offers seven lessons of education entrepreneurship:

- Chains of low-cost private schools offer efficiencies absent from standalone schools. A few chains discussed in *Really Good Schools* are BRAC (Bangladesh), PEAS (Uganda), Omega (Ghana), and Bridge International Academies.
- Costs must be kept low from the parents' perspective. Morale must be kept high to maintain parental satisfaction and minimize staff turnover.
- Scripted lessons plans are a powerful tool for ensuring consistent quality and cost-effective teaching.
- Many cash-strapped families can't save up money to pay fees in one or two large chunks but can manage to pay in small increments. Omega Schools has experimented with both an installment plan and a "pay as you learn" daily payment plan.
- Teaching must accommodate students who learn at different paces. This can be facilitated via adaptive-learning technology (as some chains have employed) or peer learning.
- While a for-profit business model must be financially sustainable, philanthropies can play a role by providing targeted scholarships for the poorest of the poor or in covering overhead expenses.
- Leasing classroom space often makes more sense than buying or building them.

Tooley also finds that public corruption and political oppression are often reasons

why parents from Liberia to India have lost trust in state power over education. Corruption and oppression may abate if reductions in public spending accompany the growth of low-cost private schooling.

Reclaiming the Framework of Education

While part 1 is firmly rooted in evidence, part 2 is more speculative, raising questions about what might be achieved if the framework of education were no longer under government control. It begins by examining two sets of criticisms that could be used against low-cost private education, arguments put forth in the widely acclaimed books, *Poor Economics*, by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, and *The Case against Education*, by Bryan Caplan. On close inspection, the difficulties they raise result from government intervention and apply to public education.

One common complaint about traditional schooling is its dreariness: too often students find it boring rather than engaging. Tooley discusses remedies proposed by educators as diverse as Sir Ken Robinson; Salman Kahn, creator of YouTube's Kahn Academy; the legendary Maria Montessori; Rudolf Steiner, who inspired more than 1,000 private Waldorf schools in around 60 countries; and A. S. Neill, creator of famed Summerhill school in Suffolk, England.

The "unbearable burden of learning," as Tooley calls it, is a symptom of rigid, over-regulated schooling that emerges from the government's framework of education. Five other problems arising from government control also stand out, perhaps especially for public schools in the developing world:

- National exams, which are too infrequent for course-correction;
- School dropouts who don't complete their exams;
- Exams and curricula that are more about "signaling" than for develop-

ing skills and human capital;

- Age-based classrooms that ignore students' developmental differences;
- Curriculum content that ignores students' interests and motivations.

These problems are not inherent in education per se. Instruction in music and martial arts have structure, standards, and testing, yet they manage to keep many students highly engaged. Other examples of non-government frameworks of education discussed are India's NIIT technology training certification (reviled by government but respected in industry) and the highly esteemed International Baccalaureate program. Tooley offers further thoughts on student engagement and testing, including lessons from the global PISA exams. What becomes clear is that a rich variety of institutions and indicators of academic excellence could emerge if governments didn't interfere so much with the framework of education.

Off to America

In Part 3, Tooley looks at the current state of American education, and how we can best improve it. Paradoxically, it's often the self-professed "realists"—who doubt that American education can be measurably improved upon—who underestimate its problems. (They also seem to think that the only way forward must include a teacher lecturing a few days a week in front of a classroom.) Tooley grapples at length with the educational writings of Charles Murray, who is both a very thoughtful critic of current educational policies and highly doubtful that most students could be more academically successful.

Next, Tooley examines the transformational potential of school vouchers and charter schools, along with associated proposals such as tax-credit scholarships and education savings accounts. Although more than 60 years have elapsed since the publication of Milton Friedman's definitive statement in favor of vouchers, the

percentage of American school children in such programs is in the very low single digits. However justified they appear in theory, vouchers in practice have been easily blocked by vested interests. Charter schools face a similar problem: supply has not kept up with demand because of huge bureaucratic and political impediments. A more ambitious vision for an American educational renaissance—in which low-cost private schools play a key role—may prove to be far more practical.

Friedman himself became skeptical that vouchers were sufficient to fully transform education. The exhaustively researched Newcastle Commission Report of 1861, he learned, had found that all but a tiny percentage of children in England and Wales attended school for around 6 years—despite only small government subsidies to some schools and well before schooling was compulsory. Such findings were confirmed and expanded upon in the mid twentieth century by the economist E. G. West, who found that educational quality was maintained in the for-profit private schools that

were outside of government control of the curriculum. West also demonstrated a similar story occurred in New York State, where schooling was nearly universal before 1821 (well before it became compulsory) and with only small state subsidies.

Given the examples from the nineteenth century and the developing world today, could low-cost, high-quality private education serve American families of modest means? Undoubtedly. In the United States, a private-school business model that strives to keep costs very affordable could become financially sustainable even with tuition as low as \$3,000 per year—about \$58 per week. At this price, even families just above the federal poverty level, with average annual discretionary income of \$6,040, could afford to enroll one child and possibly two children, assuming that all discretionary income were spent on school fees. This \$3,000 estimate contrasts with current average private-school fees at the elementary level of \$9,263 per year.

Where in the United States are low-cost private schools most likely to take off first?

When regulatory flexibility is combined with key housing, demographic, and educational indicators, six large cities look like especially good matches for low-cost private schools: Jacksonville, Fla.; Charlotte, N.C.; Louisville, Ky.; Milwaukee, Wisc.; Atlanta, Ga.; and St. Louis, Mo. Judging only by a state's regulatory climate (i.e., teacher certification requirements and curriculum flexibility), states in the most-attractive category include Texas, Iowa, Alabama, and Pennsylvania, while states with the least regulatory flexibility include Arkansas, Virginia, the Carolinas, Florida, and Massachusetts.

Tooley has made a compelling case for the low-cost private school revolution. Now it's time for entrepreneurs to advance the cause in the developed world. Educational independence—and the benefits it brings to students and society—will be greater to the extent that we unshackle the framework of education from government control and let schooling be driven by the visions of innovators and the concern of parents for the well-being of their children.

About the Author



JAMES TOOLEY is Vice Chancellor (President) of the University of Buckingham in England, where he also serves as Professor of Educational Entrepreneurship and Policy, and is a Senior Fellow at the Independent Institute. He was formerly Director of the E. G. West Centre and Professor of Education Policy at Newcastle University upon Tyne, and temporarily Global Head of Low Cost Schools for GEMS Education. He received his Ph.D. in education from the University of London, and he has previously taught and researched at the Universities of Oxford and Manchester, Simon Fraser University, and University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

In addition, Dr. Tooley was Founder and President of the Education Fund, Orient Global, living for two years in Hyderabad, India, where he helped create a chain of low-cost private schools and associated educational infrastructure. He also set up educational companies in China and Ghana, with a further company in India. *Philanthropy Magazine* has described Dr. Tooley as “a 21st-century Indiana Jones” traveling to “the remotest regions on Earth researching something that many regard as mythical: private, parent-funded schools serving the Third World poor.”



INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE is a non-profit, non-partisan, public-policy research and educational organization that shapes ideas into profound and lasting impact. The mission of Independent is to boldly advance peaceful, prosperous, and free societies grounded in a commitment to human worth and dignity. Applying independent thinking to issues that matter, we create transformational ideas for today's most pressing social and economic challenges. The results of this work are published as books, our quarterly journal, *The Independent Review*, and other publications and form the basis for numerous conference and media programs. By connecting these ideas with organizations and networks, we seek to inspire action that can unleash an era of unparalleled human flourishing at home and around the globe.