



School Choice Has Been Tried— And It Works!

by Matthew J. Brouillette

Summary

Allowing parents greater freedom to choose the schools their children attend will lead to educational disaster, claim the anti-school choice mythmakers. But school choice, both historically and where it is currently being practiced, has a proven track record of helping students learn better and perform to the best of their abilities.

Main text word count: 727

More than at any time in the nation's history, Americans today are upset with the poor performance, increasing expense, and lack of improvement in their government-run public schools. While there are certainly bright spots in the system here and there, the signs of frustration are everywhere. Surveys show that large majorities of parents support more K-12 alternatives for their children as a means to escape substandard schools. Thousands of families are on waiting lists to get their children into charter schools. Applicants for even partial private school scholarships number in the millions, and millions more students are now being taught at home.

In other words, parents in ever-growing numbers are demanding *school choice*—the right, freedom, and ability to choose for their children the safest and best schools. However, those who favor school choice as one remedy to the public schools' ills must answer the enduring myths that are raised by defenders of the status quo.

Opponents of school choice such as the highly paid top brass of the school employee labor unions denounce choice as "experimental" and claim that it will somehow undermine not only public education but society in general. Laying such self-serving scare talk to rest is critical to the success of the school choice movement. A brief look at American history reveals that school choice is neither a new idea nor an unsuccessful one.

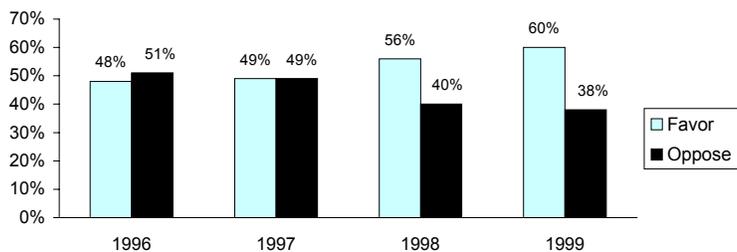
Early Americans enjoyed extensive freedom in education. For families, it meant complete parental control and a variety of options free from governmental interference or influence. Writing in the September 9, 1999, issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, educational philanthropist Ted Forstmann pointed out that government-delivered education "wasn't established until roughly a century after our country's founding. The system it replaced

—the system of education our country was founded upon—was characterized above all by diversity, competition, and choice. Not only did this system produce some of the greatest Americans of our

continued on back

School Choice Is Increasingly Popular among Public School Parents

Would you favor or oppose a proposal that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church related school they choose if government paid all or part of the tuition?



Source: Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, 1999

history, but the most basic measurement of achievement—literacy—was very high, in many states higher than it is today.”

Will school choice undermine society itself, “Balkanizing” Americans into anti-social enclaves? Of all the myths about school choice, this one may be the most absurd. No study has ever shown that children who attend charter, private, or home schools display more anti-social behavior, take more drugs, flout more laws, shoot more of their classmates, or in any way make less well-adjusted citizens than their traditional public school counterparts. Indeed, one of the reasons parents increasingly prefer educational alternatives is the greater likelihood that their children will be able to learn the values and the skills necessary for success and happiness in later life.

Incidentally, it was not school choice that “Balkanized” communist Yugoslavia. Before that country broke apart in 1992, parents there had practically no alternatives to the government-controlled educational monopoly.

Restoring freedom of choice in education is a practical as well as a moral imperative. The repeated failure of government school reforms based solely on changing the rules (longer school days, smaller class sizes, uniforms, etc.) and increasing resources (spending for schools in Michigan has grown by 57 percent since 1990) demonstrates the need for incentive-based reforms such as choice to improve the quality of education. Parental choice will improve all schools, government and private, by providing them with powerful incentives to treat families as customers rather than as captive audiences.

A 1998 Harvard University study showed that in New York City, students receiving scholarship vouchers to attend private schools—selected randomly by lottery—are outperforming their peers in the public schools. Observers also report less tardiness, cheating, and destruction of property. Meanwhile, both student performance and parental satisfaction are up in Milwaukee, home to a voucher program approved by the Wisconsin legislature in 1990.

Michigan parents enjoy limited choice from among a range of K-12 government schools, and evidence suggests that even this small dose of competition has encouraged many schools to innovate and improve. Full choice in the form of vouchers or tax credits to help parents—especially lower- and middle-income ones—would result in increased competition and would likely produce even more dramatic improvements.

School choice has been tried—and it works. Removing the financial and political barriers that prevent families from choosing the safest and best schools will unleash the creative power of competition to help solve today’s intractable and expensive educational problems.

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