

School Choice – An Educational Custom Fit

Imagine if only one size of pants were sold in stores and government regulations wouldn't allow any other size to be made available to consumers. This may sound crazy but it's much like what's happening with the education of our nation's children. As Americans we enjoy a wide range of personal choice, and thankfully it includes our ability to select the pants that fit us best. But think for a moment about traditional public education. For decades the public-school system has offered a one size fits all approach to educating our nation's children. As we approached the 21st century, the public-school system began to show its age. More and more children began to fall behind in a rapidly changing environment marked by the introduction of personal computers and later the internet.

Sensing a need for change, many people began to push for new educational models that would keep up with the times. This marked the beginning of the school choice movement. Both charter schools and school voucher programs are collectively referred to as "school choice" initiatives, in that they allow parents freedom to choose individualized education options for their children that are outside of the traditional "one size fits all" public school system. A school voucher program provides parents with certificates that are used to pay for education at a school of their choice, rather than the public school to which they are assigned. Charter schools on the other hand are publicly funded schools that have been freed from inefficient public-school system rules and regulations in exchange for accountability to produce positive, measurable results.

These agreed to results are set forth in each school's charter. The ability for parents to choose an education path that is best for their children is an exciting opportunity currently revolutionizing public education.

Considering the importance of public education, it's understandable that many people would be hesitant to make changes to the system. Those opposed to school choice site concerns that public schools would be traded in for profit-based education corporations that care more for financial profit than the individual education of students. Others site concern for what appears to be government sponsorship of private religious schools through the funding provided by various school voucher programs. Those against choice should be commended for demonstrating a committed concern for the education of our nation's children, but the overwhelming evidence proves that school choice is the right direction for the future.

A characteristic of privately operated charter schools is the focus on success through measurable achievement and accountability. Imagine again the one size fits all pants store, how could they stay in business if another store offered various sizes and styles? Simple, they couldn't, not when faced with competition that provides a better choice for consumers. The traditional public-school system of the past had no competition. There was no incentive to improve the quality of education they provided since there was nothing to measure it against. The school choice movement for the first time introduced an alternative to poorly performing public schools. Charter schools make a commitment, or charter, to achieve a measurable level of educational performance within a defined period of time. This concept works and has produced results in places like Chicago, where charter schools show better performance in ACT test scores, high school graduation rates, and greater numbers of students continuing on to college (Rand).

One group that benefits greatly from school choice is the urban poor. For decades there has been school choice for families that could afford it. The wealthy have always provided very expensive private schools for their children, and middleclass families with the resources have moved to neighborhoods that offered the best schools. But the poor, often in urban areas, have had no other option than to send their children to underperforming and sometimes even dangerous public schools. Through school choice initiatives poor families have been given the same opportunities to send their children to safer and better performing schools' which others have enjoyed for many years. In addition to the urban poor, other often overlooked groups can greatly benefit from a system that allows individual schools to focus on gifted, special education, or teen pregnancy programs (Chub). It's clear that choices in schools allow a custom fit of education solutions for every type of student.

School choice represents change and there will always be those that resist change stand to gain from a return to the old system. One of the most active opponents to school choice is the National Education Association. Representing public education professionals, the NEA is the largest labor union in the US and boasts over 3.2 million members (NEA). The NEA benefits from keeping status quo and exercising strong political power. At stake are changes in job performance accountability, and the loss of union jobs a result of non-unionized schools. The positions the NEA has taken on other issues have often been criticized as favoring the labor interests of its members rather than what's best for students. One of the programs the NEA has been most vocal against has been school vouchers, contending that vouchers amount to government funding of religious based schools. On the contrary, citizens are allowed to retain a portion of their tax dollars that would have been spent on local public-school funding and apply it to a school of their choosing.

It is the citizen, not the government that selects and contributes to a private school whether it is religiously based or not. Consider families that are already sending children to private schools, they must pay the private school tuition and in addition to the tax burden for a public school they are not even attending. This double burden is unfair and amounts to a government fine for families that pursue private education without the help of vouchers.

It's clear that the historical one size fits all approach to education is outdated. The new fast pace of the digital age demands that we act quickly and accurately in guiding our public education policies. Cling to an antiquated system that provides poor results is a guarantee that traditional public education will continue to produce nothing other than poor results. Instead, a path of measurable results and accountability should be pursued. The arguments of those against school choice must be seen for what they are, and that is nothing more than protection of special interests such as big unions. Our nation must ensure that children will be provided with a choice-based education that is forward thinking, customized, fair to all citizens, and able to move into the future with them.