

School Choice: A Lifeline for American Education

Luc Drymer Graham

Luc Drymer Graham is a high school student at Lower Canada College in Montreal, Quebec. He is passionate about economics, the environment, and international affairs and is a strong believer in the importance of free speech and ideological diversity in solving global issues. Luc is an avid world traveler with a love for adventure and community service and is a champion tennis player.

School choice is based on the principle of funding students over institutions. In practice, it can be implemented through a variety of different policies, but the goal is always to allow families the maximum level of freedom in determining the institution that best fits the needs of their children. Despite its stigmatization among certain political factions in America, school choice is one of the best tools in the country's arsenal for reforming its broken education system.

America's education system is in tatters. In its 2018 report, the Program for International Student Assessment found the country's teenagers trailing their counterparts in far less wealthy and developed nations in reading (ranked eighth), science (ranked 11th), and math (ranked 30th) — distinctly unimpressive showings for the most powerful and prosperous nation on Earth (Schleicher). These dismal results are inevitable outgrowths of a system controlled by large education monopolies that stymie the ability of parents to enact reforms. Fortunately, there exists a simple solution that can reverse decades of negative trends, a tool that can naturally regulate the quality and character of educational instruction: school choice, the revolutionary idea that parents are better arbiters of their children's needs than the government. Giving families of *all* income levels an opportunity to choose where and how their children are educated will decrease wealth inequality, promote national unity, and bolster upward mobility for lower-income students.

School choice can take the form of many different policies. While charter schools, educational vouchers, tax credits, and inter-district enrollment options all differ in structure, their goals are identical: to promote parental choice and hold institutions accountable. Most low-income students — who are disproportionately minorities — across the country are

assigned a public school based on their zip code, for which a significant portion of funding comes from local property taxes (Reschovsky). Since neighborhoods are generally segregated by class, many schools do not have the means to offer the same quality of instruction as those in wealthier localities. The promise of more secure and well-equipped environments is also a major incentive for the most experienced teachers to leave failing schools. Ultimately, it is the students who are left behind. Throwing money at inefficient schools is not necessarily the solution; deserving kids must be given the option to enroll in better-performing institutions, where they can receive the tools they need to thrive in the modern world. Once again, this can be achieved in many different ways, but it is essential that these children be set free from the shackles of their assigned schools.

School choice, however, is more than just a solution to the persistent racial and income disparities in education; it also ensures that parents have the opportunity to send their kids to schools that reflect the values espoused at home. Say a parent is not content with a school's sexual education curriculum and believes that their child's development would be better served by exposure to more traditional values and constructs of morality and religious community. Under school choice policies, this parent could enroll their child in a more like-minded public school district and would not have to belong to the highest income bracket to be able to send this child to a private, parochial institution. One could, of course, still debate if schools should instill traditional values in their pupils in the first place, but the beauty of educational choice is that no parent is ever bound by the personal decisions of others. Everyone gets to raise their children in the manner in which they see fit.

The same principle holds true on ideological grounds: disagreements over what should be taught in the classroom are inevitable in a diverse society. The current incarnation of these disputes has taken shape in the form of prolific battles over the application of the vulgarized outgrowths of Critical Theory to the analysis of class, race, history, and current events. But, in reality, these arguments have existed for centuries and, while they may change in substance, will persist as long as people of varying viewpoints are forced to subsidize the same schools with their tax dollars (Tuccille). It is certainly important to teach young people how to deconstruct and analyze the world around them, but it is an inherently subjective endeavor. A focus on exposure to different perspectives is always helpful, but public schools are not necessarily the best avenues to achieve it. According to a 2014 paper published in the *Journal of School Choice*, "greater exposure to private schooling is not associated with any more or less political tolerance" than what would be found in public schools (Cheng). Furthermore, "students with greater exposure to homeschooling tend to be more politically tolerant—a

finding contrary to the claims of many political theorists.” (Cheng) Allowing parents to choose the institution that best fits their values bypasses the toxicity of curriculum battles without sacrificing a sense of community and national unity, two of the main goals of the original public education system (“The Battle to Control the System”). With school choice, the Culture War battles of the past decade — the classic caricature of red-faced suburban mothers causing chaos at a school board meeting, screaming at a dais of impassive administrators before being forcibly removed by security — would no longer make nightly news.

The most insidious argument employed by defenders of the status quo is that school choice programs siphon money from public school systems (Mull). This would undoubtedly harm the vulnerable students who depend on these schools for opportunity and upward mobility, they say. However, beneath this deception lies an inherent contradiction: public schools are funded by taxpayer dollars, including money paid by the parents of enrolled children (DeAngelis and McCluskey). The principle of funding students over institutions is simply based on returning school subsidies back to the families who provided them. By diverting money from the vast education bureaucracy into the pockets of parents where its purchasing power can be maximized, school choice programs allow for tailored decisions most fitted to the needs of children and families.

In addition, giving families the freedom to choose their school does not necessarily mean they will decide to leave the one they were assigned. The fact that teachers’ unions, for example, continue to claim that certain schools will lose money concedes they do not believe parents would choose to remain at their schools (DeAngelis and McCluskey). If teachers’ unions and school boards were confident in the quality of their instruction, then simply giving parents the option to search for other schools would be of no risk or concern to them.

It would follow the basic economic laws of competition that, upon the dissolution of unaccountable public monopolies, the quality of education would increase. When a particular school sees students — and precious funding — move elsewhere, it is naturally compelled to make changes necessary for its survival. If it is unable to do so, then it will succumb to the pressures of its patrons and will be forced to close. This pressure can only be achieved through policies that promote educational freedom. Inter-district enrollment options and the deregulation of charter schools have both produced more desirable outcomes for children across America, especially the marginalized students stuck in underperforming schools.

In particular, charters — shining testaments to the innovation that can be unleashed when government steps aside — have shown to improve performance among their students relative to those attending district schools. A recent study from Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance examined trends in school performance using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). From 2005 to 2017, charter students showed learning gains that were three months ahead of their district school counterparts (Peterson and Shakeel). The effect was most pronounced for charter students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile, who saw their NAEP math and reading test scores improve at a rate equivalent to an extra half-year’s worth of learning over the aforementioned time period (Peterson and Shakeel). No wonder there were almost 50000 students on charter school waitlists in 2019 in New York City alone (“New York City Charter Schools are in Demand”)! Unfortunately, with the misguided intention of “protecting” public schools, many governments, including that of New York City, have placed caps on the number of charter schools permitted to open (O’Connell-Domenech). If only they would realize that long charter waiting lists are the product of widespread disappointment with the status quo.

Charter schools are only just the tip of the iceberg; researchers at the University of Arkansas’s School Choice Demonstration Project have developed an Education Freedom Index to compare all aspects of educational choice present in different states. A study of the data found a strong correlation between the index rankings and state NAEP test scores for math and reading (Wolf et al.). Between 2003 and 2019, the authors write, “higher levels of education freedom are significantly associated with higher NAEP achievement levels and higher NAEP achievement gains.” (Wolf et al.) While the study doesn’t prove causation, at the very least, its findings suggest that the interscholastic competition resulting from school choice policies puts upward pressure on academic performance (The Editorial Board).

Educational choice — be it through direct or residual effects — benefits every single child in the country. Its expansion is essential to fixing America’s broken education system that leaves too many families underserved. It will make the nation’s economy more productive, families more secure, and will finally bring the American dream within reach for marginalized communities. Institutional improvement begins with the input of parents, and school choice is the only way to give them a voice. America must fund students, not schools.

References

- DeAngelis, Corey A., and Neal McCluskey. "West Virginia Looks to Expand Educational Freedom." Reason Foundation, 11 Mar. 2021, www.reason.org/commentary/west-virginia-looks-to-expand-educational-freedom/.
- Hess, Frederick. "How to Make the Case for School Choice." *Education Next*, 30 July 2020, www.educationnext.org/make-case-school-choice-hess-elizabeth-warren/.
- Mull, Teresa. "School Choice Doesn't Destroy Public Schools; It Makes Them Better." *Deseret News*, 28 Feb. 2018, www.deseret.com/2018/2/28/20640860/op-ed-school-choice-doesn-t-destroy-public-schools-it-makes-them-better.
- "New York City Charter Schools are in Demand." New York City Charter School Centre, 2019, www.nyccharterschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NYC-CSC-demand-2019-20.pdf.
- O'Connell-Domenech, Alejandra. "Board of Regents Supports Charter School CAP, Votes to Reject Charter High School in NYC." *AMNY*, 12 July 2021, www.amny.com/news/board-of-regents-supports-charter-school-cap-votes-to-reject-charter-high-school-in-nyc/amp/.
- Peterson, Paul E., and M. Danish Shakeel. "Charter Schools Show Steeper Upward Trend in Student Achievement than District Schools." *Education Next*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2021, www.educationnext.org/charter-schools-show-steeper-upward-trend-student-achievement-first-nationwide-study/.
- Reschovsky, Andrew. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2017, *The Future of U.S. Public School Revenue from the Property Tax*, www.lincolninst.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/future-us-public-school-revenue-policy-brief_0.pdf.
- Schleicher, Andreas. PISA 2018: Insights and Interpretations. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2018, www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA%202018%20Insights%20and%20Interpretations%20FINAL%20PDF.pdf?utm_source=morning_brew.
- "The Battle to Control the System." *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History*, by Ellwood P. Cubberley, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919, p. 167, www.ia800202.us.archive.org/6/items/publiceducationi00cubbuoft/publiceducationi00cubbuoft.pdf.
- The Editorial Board. "School Choice Scores for Public Schools." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 26 Mar. 2021, www.wsj.com/articles/school-choice-scores-for-public-schools-11616799171.
- Tuccille, J.D. "Government Control Turns Schools into Partisan Battlegrounds." *Reason.com*, Reason, 6 May 2019, www.reason.com/2019/05/06/government-control-turns-schools-into-partisan-battlegrounds/.
- Wolf, Patrick J., et al. University of Arkansas, 2021, *Education Freedom and Student Achievement: Is More School Choice Associated with Higher State-Level Performance on the NAEP?*, cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wordpress.uark.edu/dist/9/544/files/2018/10/education-freedom-and-naep-scores.pdf.