

School Choice: A Prudent Path Toward Liberty

Joseph Klesney and Michael B. Barkey

Mr. Klesney and Mr. Barkey are policy analysts for the Acton Institute. This article first appeared on the Acton Institute's web site.

Innecity parents and church pastors have joined together with residents of rural areas and homeschoolers in demanding greater educational freedom. Education vouchers, tuition tax credits, charter schools, and other forms of school choice have garnered the support of a diverse coalition of parents in search of a common end: educational excellence. Public education bureaucrats and many teachers unions remain vigorously opposed to greater educational freedom and the competition and accountability it brings. They would see their monopoly power vastly diminished by reform—in favor of parents and children.

Christians know that God bestowed upon parents the responsibility to be the first and foremost educators of their children. As Pope John Paul II observes in *Familiaris Consortio* (1981),

Those in society who are in charge of schools must never forget that the parents have been appointed by God himself as the first and principal educators of their children and that their right is completely inalienable.

It is the responsibility of parents, then, to decide how their children are educated and to what end. Under our current system, a government-imposed monopoly dictates where and how children are educated. This monopoly usurps the fundamental responsibility of parents for their child's educational needs.

The ideal form of education is one that is freely chosen by parents in accordance with their values that best meets their child's intellectual, physical, and spiritual needs. Religious and private, non-sectarian schools can play an important role, as a free market in education allows a wide variety of school concepts to take hold. The most efficient system of education would resemble the free market, as is the case for other goods and services, with many providers to meet the diversity in needs.

Through school choice parents learn to become more actively involved in the decisions surrounding their children's education. They are no longer forced to remain passive figures in the lives of their children with government bureaucrats left to call the shots. Instead, parents are called upon to "shop around" for the best available education to meet their own child's needs. Parents exemplify responsibility in taking such an active part in their own children's education. This is something that would have been next to impossible for many parents—especially for poor parents whose children are most in need of a sound education in order to

realize their full human potential later in life—without a school-choice regime.

Some argue that school choice would imperil genuine educational freedom by opening the schoolhouse door to government regulators. Instead they argue for the complete separation of school and state—with no public dollars flowing to education.

Of course, with every influx of government dollars must come caution. And past efforts by government to fund educational decisions, such as the G.I. Bill and Pell Grant program, should help guide our public policy. But in today's debate surrounding school choice, we must ask ourselves some important questions about the choice concepts available, and let the evidence speak for itself.

Are the freedoms of charter schools dramatically imposed upon by bureaucratic restrictions, or are these publicly funded schools superior to the present system of government schooling? Do educational vouchers permit government to regulate the religious activity in schools, or simply enable parents to purchase an education at the school of their choice? Do tuition tax credits allow social engineers to encourage one form of educational experience over another, or simply enable parents to better afford the education deemed by them most appropriate for a child?

These are real concerns that must be examined as the evidence on school choice continues to pour in. A school-choice regime that only entrenches government in education, instead of freeing parents from bureaucratic control, is self-defeating and sows the seeds of its own demise. Marshall Fritz, president of the Separation of School and State Alliance, describes why such school-choice options should be approached with caution:

Hobbling today's private schools with state controls is too high a price to pay for "choice." While [school-choice options] will provide a flurry of competition and change, real improvement would be delayed for decades until [they] prove that they, too, cannot repair a tax-funded, i.e., government schooling system.

That is one reason why numerous, competing experiments at increasing educational freedom are so important.

But, as Joseph Bast and David Harmer point out in a recent forum sponsored by the Cato Institute, by "decrying mere improvement as the enemy of the ideal, [separationists] do more to thwart the separation of school and state than to advance it."

[S]eparationists criticize the first step in the right direction because it does not immediately take us to the ultimate destination. . . . [W]hatever its merits ideologically, complete separation [of school and state] is currently a political fantasy. [School-choice concepts] offer a halfway house to wean the public from their addiction to government provision of education.

In a world with no education taxes, responsible parents would directly pay the full costs of educating their children at the school of their choice; the state would

not be involved, and the poor would receive funds for education from private philanthropists like Ted Forstmann of the Washington Scholarship Fund, thus fulfilling the Christian principle of subsidiarity. School choice moves us closer toward this ideal, though not fully.

Advocating school choice is a way to achieve greater liberty and parental responsibility in education. Very rarely can great reforms toward liberty be accomplished overnight, as the late Russell Kirk pointed out. Such reforms require the cultivation of habits and the development of institutions in civil society to help order that liberty to the good. School choice, in all of its many forms, is a prudent step in the right direction—toward restoring the fundamental role of parents in providing an education for their children. Ω