

Jay P. Greene's Blog

Florida Mom Smacks Down Choice Deniers

Jason Bedrick

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Last week, the president and education chair of the Florida State League of Women Voters (LWV) — which is a party to the Florida teacher union's lawsuit against the state's tax-credit scholarship program — argued that some parents are just not well-informed enough to choose a school for their own kids:

Choosing small, private, mostly religious schools is most likely a poor choice, but how can [parents] know?

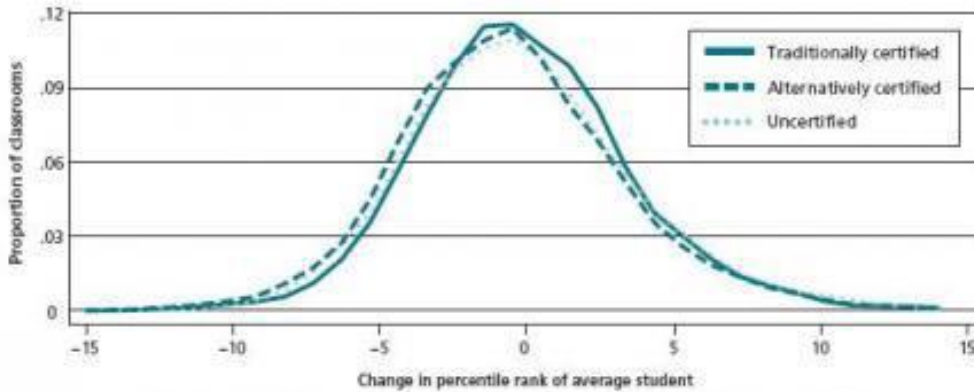
What assurance do parents have that their children's needs are being met? Not much. Teachers in private schools do not have the same certification requirements. Schools do not have to use the state curriculum or administer state tests. Private schools are not graded as public schools are.

Parents are told they can vote with their feet if they are dissatisfied. Some do, but many may have little idea that their children do not receive the same educational opportunities. Small private schools have cachet but may well lack quality.

The LWV apparatchiks provide zero evidence that private schools are “likely a poor choice.”

Sure, private school teachers don't need to be certified, but as this handy chart from the Brookings Institution demonstrates (see page 8), such certification is a guarantee of absolutely nothing:

Figure 1. Teacher Impacts on Math Performance by Initial Certification



Note: Classroom-level impacts on average student performance, controlling for baseline score, student demographics, and program participation. LAUSD elementary teachers, grade three through five. For details of how an ordinary least squares regression was used to adjust for student background, baseline performance, and other factors, see the appendix.

Traditionally certified teachers are no more or less effective, on average, than alternatively certified or even uncertified teachers.

Likewise, they present no evidence that the state curriculum is superior to other curricula. And private schools may not administer the state test, but they do administer other nationally norm-referenced tests that give parents information about how their children are performing compared to students nationwide. Funny that the LWV apparatchiks would omit that fact.

Lacking any evidence that parents aren't choosing wisely, the LWV argument amounts to "trust us, we know what's good for your kids better than you do," and at least one mother is sick of it:

I'm tired of people who think they know better than I do, especially when it comes to my children's education. Like the League of Women Voters.

The League joined the teacher's union to file a lawsuit to end the Florida Tax Credit scholarship, which allows low-income and working-class parents like myself to send their children to private schools. Three of my daughters are among the 78,000 who use them.

The mother is one of 15 parents of scholarship students who intervened in the *McCall v. Scott* lawsuit to defend the scholarship program, and she's not taking any guff from the people who claim to speak for women voters but want to deny them access to more educational choices for their children:

Two leaders of the League said in the Tallahassee Democrat that the scholarship cannot support high quality education, and choosing private, mostly religious, schools is most likely a poor choice. They actually wrote that scholarship parents "have little idea that their children do not receive the same educational opportunities."

Believe me, we know.

We know many people have school choice. Some have enough money to move into neighborhoods where the public schools are excellent. Others choose to send their kids to private schools. Many of us can't afford to move, but thanks to the scholarships, we have choices.

The mother describes how her children's zoned district school wasn't rigorous enough for them, but she couldn't send them to another school through the district's choice program because it was full. Fortunately, they got scholarships to attend a private school that they "absolutely love," where students regularly graduate and enroll in college, including Ivy League schools. She also appreciates that the school has separate-gender classes (for which there is actual evidence that it improves performance), the teachers communicate regularly with the parents, and the principal "shakes every student's hand every morning and knows each by name."

The school works for her kids, so why does the LWV want to take that option away? She concludes:

I'm tired of people with many choices trying to block the rest of us from having any. It reminds me of the civil rights battles over 50 years ago. Who is blocking the schoolhouse doors now?

Maybe if the League talked to more "struggling" parents, they'd learn from them. My job is helping public housing residents become self-sufficient, so I talk to working-class parents all day.

Many want their children in different schools for various reasons, but too often, they're stuck with limited choices.

The scholarship gives them options, gives them the opportunity to have more choices for their children – just like parents with more money.

Anybody who believes otherwise really needs to think twice.

Jason Bedrick is a policy analyst with the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.