

The Boston Globe

Expanding educational opportunity

By Ken Ardon and Jason Bedrick

August 5, 2014

The Massachusetts Constitution declares that the preservation of its citizens rights and liberties depends upon “spreading the opportunities and advantages of education” to all children, no matter their income.

Unfortunately, the Bay State’s educational system fails to live up to that vision. Access to a good school too often depends on a family’s ability to afford a home in an expensive community. But Massachusetts can break the tie between education and housing by enacting a scholarship tax credit law to expand educational opportunity for tens of thousands of low-income students.

Massachusetts is internationally competitive in math and science and consistently ranks among the very top performers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called “the nation’s report card,” but these aggregate scores obscure the reality that performance varies considerably across districts, particularly along socio-economic lines.

In wealthier towns and cities like Dover and Weston, where the median household income exceeds \$180,000, students perform well. On the 2013 MCAS, between 97 and 100 percent of students in those scored ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’ in math and English.

By contrast, in the 10 poorest cities and towns in Massachusetts, only 40.6 percent of students scored ‘proficient’ or ‘advanced’ on the MCAS, considerably below the statewide average of 65.1 percent.

Higher-income families have choices while lower-income families do not. The former can afford to live in communities with higher-performing district schools or send their kids to private school. The latter often have only one viable option: the district school to which their children are geographically assigned.

Some low-income families are fortunate enough to send their children to METCO or charter schools, but there are more than 50,000 students on waiting lists, demonstrating both the demand for and lack of additional educational options.

While educational choice programs are not a panacea, they are a precondition to ensuring equality of opportunity. Randomized controlled trials – the gold standard of social science research – consistently show that educational choice programs improve academic outcomes for low-income students, often to a greater degree than for higher-income students.

A scholarship tax credit law tailored to Massachusetts' needs could expand educational opportunity for students from low-income families while remaining revenue neutral for the commonwealth. There are currently about 200,000 students attending the school of their choice through STC laws in more than a dozen states, including New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

We propose a state tax credit worth 90 percent of the amount a corporate or individual taxpayer donates to a qualified scholarship organization. The organization would then use the money to provide scholarships averaging between \$4,000 and \$4,500 for students whose family income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, for use at private or out-of-district public schools.

Though just a fraction of the nearly \$16,000 spent per pupil at district schools, these scholarships would significantly expand options for students living in low-income areas. In the five poorest of Massachusetts' 10 largest cities — Springfield, Fall River, New Bedford, Brockton and Lynn — the average listed private school tuition ranges from \$4,150 to \$4,510 for grades K-8 and \$9,125 for high school. Moreover, those figures do not include all the tuition assistance that private schools already provide to low-income families.

Though the Bay State's constitution contains a historically anti-Catholic provision banning the allocation of public funds at sectarian schools, the US Supreme Court has held that credit-eligible donations under an STC law remain private funds because they never enter the public treasury. Tax credits are not constitutionally different from tax deductions for charitable donations or tax exemptions that secular and religious nonprofits already receive.

An education system that determines a child's school based on the home her parents can afford fails to achieve the state constitution's vision. True equality of educational opportunity requires access to a quality education regardless of a family's income. The proposed scholarship tax credit would move the Commonwealth toward that vision by helping tens of thousands of low-income students attend the school of their choice.

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