



You Guesst It: Who's afraid of school choice?

By Jason Bedrick

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Will giving parents more educational options spell the end of the traditional district school system?

Education bureaucrats seem to think so. Last month, Oklahoma City superintendent Rob Neu declared that the “greatest threat to public education” is legislative support for educational choice initiatives, such as education savings accounts (ESAs). ESAs in Arizona and Florida allow parents to purchase a wide variety of educational products and services—such as private school tuition, tutoring, textbooks, or online courses—using 90 percent of the funds that the state would have spent to educate their child in their assigned district school.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, recently decried “the exit strategy from public education that these programs represent.” Superintendent Neu warned that ESAs would “drain already limited resources from public schools.” Likewise, Tulsa superintendent Keith Ballard predicted earlier this month that “the first 500 kids that [sic] go to a private school are going to take a million dollars out of Tulsa public” schools. Of course, the only way that a red penny intended for the district schools winds up in an ESA is if parents choose to send their children elsewhere.

Why do the people running the district schools predict a mass exodus if parents were given a choice and the money followed the child? And what does that tell us?

Teachers Lead the District School Exodus

“We’re spending more money on education, sending our kids to more classrooms, but we’re getting inferior results,” lamented Jon Gabriel in response to a new Educational Testing Service (ETS) report that paints a grim picture of the state of education in America. Though America spends more per pupil than any other developed nation, U.S. millennials rank last in both numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments out of 22 countries, and third from the bottom in literacy, beating only their peers in Italy and Spain. Even our top performers fare poorly by international standards. U.S. millennials scoring in the 90th percentile ranked second to last, beating only their peers in Spain.

Moreover, even a high-performing school isn't necessarily the right fit for every child who just happens to live nearby. Some students thrive in a traditional school environment, while others are better served by a more student-led environment, advanced enrichment, vocational training, or a school that focuses on STEM or liberal arts. Each child has unique needs and the nearest district school often cannot meet all of them.

Teachers understand this better than most. Earlier this month, a veteran district-school teacher wrote an article for *The Atlantic* explaining why he is paying to send his daughter to a private school rather than enrolling her in her assigned district school for free. Though the district-school teachers were competent and well-intentioned, he feared that the “general culture” of “disengagement and compulsory learning” was bringing students down. He was willing to pay extra for a private school “where it’s acceptable, and even admirable, to show natural enthusiasm for knowledge.” Sadly, he concluded, creating such an environment at district schools “may be impossible” because “everything is both free and compulsory.

He’s not alone. A decade ago, a Fordham Institute study found that more than 20 percent of district-school teachers enrolled their children in private schools, nearly double the national average of 11 percent. The percentage of district-school teachers who enrolled their children in private schools was even higher in urban areas like Chicago (39 percent), Cincinnati (41 percent), New York (33 percent), and Philadelphia (44 percent). As Walter Williams recently observed:

“The fact that so many public school teachers enroll their own children in private schools ought to raise questions. After all, what would you think, after having accepted a dinner invitation, if you discovered that the owner, chef, waiters and busboys at the restaurant to which you were being taken don't eat there? That would suggest they have some inside information from which you might benefit.”

If even the district-school teachers are opting out, it’s no wonder the district school establishment is worried that, if given the chance, other parents would flee as well.

Parental Support for More Educational Choice

Polling data confirm that parents want more educational options. In a recent SoonerPoll survey of likely voters in Oklahoma, only 44 percent of respondents gave their local district school a grade of “A” or “B” compared to 61 percent who gave private schools those grades. When asked where they would send their children if they “could select any type of school,” 40 percent would choose a district school while 43 percent would choose a private or parochial school. An additional eight percent would choose a charter school and seven percent said they would homeschool.

Yet despite parents’ desire to enroll their children in private school, few actually do. More than 680,000 students attend Oklahoma district schools while barely 37,000 students attend

Oklahoma private schools. The reason is that it's hard to compete with "free." District schools, which spend an average of \$8,500 per pupil, are fully subsidized by the taxpayer. Oklahoma private schools charge about \$4,500 on average at elementary schools and \$6,900 on average for high school. Parents who enroll their children in private school have to pay tuition and they still have to pay taxes to support the local district school.

It's no wonder then that Oklahomans support educational choice policies. In the SoonerPoll survey, 63 percent of respondents supported giving tax credits to individuals or businesses in return for contributions to nonprofit scholarship organizations that help families select the school of their choice. Only 31 percent were opposed. (Oklahoma already has a scholarship tax credit law, but it is very limited—fewer than 500 students were able to participate in the last school year.) In addition, 56 percent of Oklahomans surveyed favored an education savings account law, while only 40 percent were opposed. These findings comport with other recent polls of voters and parents in Oklahoma and nationwide.*

But despite the wishes of parents, the education establishment doesn't want any competition. In a very telling comparison, the executive director of the Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration, Steve Crawford, recently said: "You can't take your tax dollars away from the prison system if it doesn't work for you, so why would it be okay to take away taxes from public schools?"

Accountability to Parents or Bureaucrats?

The education establishment sometimes complains that district schools can't compete on a level playing field. Sure, they're fully subsidized while private schools are not, but the district schools have to comply with more burdensome regulations than the private schools. Superintendent Neu wrote:

"Accountability is also an issue. Vouchers allow private schools and those who choose to homeschool using taxpayer dollars freedom from the myriad of accountability measures they require of traditional public schools.

Imagine if our classroom teachers in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Gotebo, and Idabel could do what's best for students without the constant worry of test scores hanging over their heads. Or what if districts had sufficient funds to buy paper, pencils, and technology without rationing or worrying about arbitrary spending restrictions that ignore the day-to-day reality of serving children?"

Neu is onto something. He yearns for his schools to be free from all the top-down regulations and "accountability" measures that he believes are crippling the ability of district schools to truly serve students. Why not lift the heavy-handed accountability measures and regulate district schools like private schools?

The reason district schools are so heavily regulated is because, unlike private schools, they are not directly accountable to parents. If a private school isn't meeting the needs of students or their parents, they can take their children and their money elsewhere. By contrast, low-income students are often a captive audience at their assigned district school, so the school does not have to be as responsive to their needs. Instead, districts and states impose numerous regulations in an attempt to approximate the real accountability that comes when parents can choose.

Rather than fight educational choice, the education establishment should embrace it as an alternative to such top-down "accountability" measures. If parents were empowered with the ability to choose their children's school, then district schools would also be held directly accountable to parents. In that case, we could dispense with the bureaucratic regulations and let parents vote with their feet.

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