



The five worst school choice moments in 2014

By [Watchdog Staff](#) / December 30, 2014

The problems school choice programs faced in 2014 weren't new.

Lawsuits, politicians whose actions don't match their words and aggressive teachers unions have troubled school choice programs since the first one was launched in Milwaukee in 1990.

Since these problems show no signs of disappearing, they warrant attention no matter how familiar they seem.

Watchdog surveyed some of the country's leading school choice experts, and these are their picks for the five worst school choice moments of 2014.

1. In Florida, [the teachers union is suing](#) to stop the state's tax-credit scholarship program, the largest school choice program in the country.

The scholarships help more than 100,000 students from low-income families attend the private school of their choice.

"It's a low moment I think for teachers unions," said Lindsey Burke, a Will Skillman Fellow in education at the [Heritage Foundation](#).

"That's pretty bad, and Grinch-like, of the opponents of school choice," said Richard Komer, senior attorney for the [Institute for Justice](#). "If you're going to kill it, kill it early, before 100,000 kids are in (choice) schools."

The lawsuit was also President of School Choice Wisconsin Jim Bender's choice for this year's grimmest moment.

"Just the fact that it throws that much potential disruption into the lives of tens of thousands of families has to mark a very low point," Bender said.

2. For C.J. Szafer, education policy director of the [Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty](#), the worst moment of the year was part of a familiar pattern.

"Policymakers talk so frequently about penalizing poor performing schools in the choice program, yet they do not do enough to reward the high-quality ones," Szafer said.

“This year, St. Marcus, a high-performing school in Milwaukee, tried to buy multiple different empty Milwaukee Public School buildings, which are owned by the city of Milwaukee. In two highly publicized examples, the city and MPS [refused to sell](#) these buildings, solely because of St. Marcus being a school in the choice program. These MPS buildings — Malcolm X and Lee — remain empty to this day.”

3. The failure of politicians to live up to their pro-school choice rhetoric also provided one of year’s worst moments for Jason Bedrick of the [Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute](#).

“A big disappointment this past year was New York’s failure to pass a school choice law,” Bedrick said.

“The state Senate passed a scholarship tax credit and there seemed to be sufficient support in the lower chamber, but it was left out of the final budget, despite Governor Cuomo’s promise to Cardinal Dolan. During his re-election campaign, Cuomo promised several groups that it would happen this year.”

4. In Louisiana, opponents of school choice bought themselves a victory at the ballot box.

The [American Federation of Teachers](#) dumped more than \$650,000 into the school board elections in Jefferson Parish, which has Louisiana’s largest school district. The heavy contributions impacted the outcome of the races and changed the dynamic of the board.

“The union had a much lighter hand, but now they have a dominant hand and that could change education in Louisiana,” said Larry Sand, president of the [California Teachers Empowerment Network](#). “That remains to be seen because it just happened, where the union interests on the school board now outnumber nonunion interests. That jumped out at me as the worst thing that happened in school choice.”

5. The protests and violence in Ferguson, Missouri, were among the biggest news stories in 2014. A little noticed story that unfolded right next-door to Ferguson proved to be one the year’s low points in school choice.

[Normandy School District](#) is one of the worst performing school districts in Missouri. After the district lost its accreditation in 2012, its students were allowed to transfer to schools in other districts.

The state took control of the Normandy district and reorganized it. Following the reorganization, the program that allowed to students to attend out of district schools was going to be stopped.

But a St. Louis County judge [ruled parents have the right](#) to transfer their children to continue sending their children to schools in other districts, saying that “every day a student attends an unaccredited school (instead of an accredited one) he/she could suffer harm that cannot be repaired after the fact.”

All the neighboring school districts in which Normandy students had been attending school welcomed the decision — all but Francis Howell School District in St. Charles County.

Francis Howell [forced kids](#) to obtain a court order before it would allow them to return to the classroom.

Francis Howell officials claimed they didn't want to drain Normandy's coffers, since Normandy was required to cover tuition costs for students to attend schools in other districts.

But James Shuls, education fellow at the [Show-Me Institute](#), said Francis Howell's reason is coming from a faux moral high ground.

“Because districts are allowed to set their own tuition rates, they could easily charge Normandy less if they were truly concerned about depleting Normandy's funds.” Shuls said.