

Pasadena Star-News

School choice is good for California

By Bob Huff

January 27, 2015

Californians demand choice. It's woven into the fabric of everyday life. Shopping for a new pair of shoes? Do you want shoes for walking, running, hiking, or dress shoes?

I find it strange then that the doors of choice are so very limited when it comes to making one of the most important decisions we will make in our lifetime: What school will our children attend?

For a great majority of California families, there is absolutely no choice in this matter. If you live in a particular neighborhood, your child will be assigned to attend School X. They will be assigned Teacher Y. They will all be taught the same subjects of Z. For many students, there is no choice. They're trapped into a "one size fits all" mentality.

Who dreamed up this system?

This is why I'm an advocate for school choice reform in California and the reason behind National School Choice Week, which takes place this week (Jan. 25-31). School choice is the simple but powerful idea that parents should be empowered to choose what school is best for their kids. National School Choice Week shines a positive spotlight on all education options for children, including public schools, public charter schools, magnet schools, private schools and homeschooling.

California is home to some innovative programs such as the District of Choice program and Open Enrollment, both of which I authored with then-Sen. Gloria Romero. But these programs are limited. The District of Choice law was meant to encourage districts to compete for students by offering programs and options that parents want. But only 31 districts have declared themselves as "Districts of Choice" since this law was passed. There are more than one thousand school districts in California.

Open Enrollment allows students to transfer from low-performing schools to institutions with a higher Academic Performance Index score. But it is also limited. Less than 15 percent of underperforming high schools in California fall under Open Enrollment guidelines. Districts also have the power to block some transfers.

In California, opportunities for a quality education exist only for those who can afford private school or by moving to a neighborhood with high performing public schools. Not many California families can afford this.

Test results of California students show that serious intervention is needed. National Assessment of Educational Progress testing in 2013 found that the average mathematics score of California fourth-grade students was 234. Students in 42 other states scored higher.

Over half of every general fund tax dollar we pay in California is directed to education. This is the best our money can buy? California is home to the seventh largest economy in the world and our tax rates are among the highest in the nation. Yet, despite these resources, many public schools continue to fail our children. California students deserve better.

Can school choice make a difference for California students? Numerous studies say yes. A report from the Cato Institute finds that 22 empirical studies find that choice improves public schools. No study has found that choice harms public schools or students.

Public employee unions have blocked many reform efforts, including bills I introduced to expand school choice for all students in California. They've also blocked legislation to ensure that every student gets the best teacher and to expand parental involvement at schools. Legislators have failed to take action to benefit our children because the school union lobby is too strong.

As we celebrate National School Choice this week, let's also choose to make our kids' education a higher priority than the adults we hire to serve them.

Sen. Bob Huff, R-Brea, is the Senate Republican leader and represents the 29th District.