

Should You Celebrate or Be Wary of National School Choice Week?

by [Julianne Hing](#), Tuesday, January 28 2014, 3:37 PM EST

This week is National School Choice Week. But is it occasion to celebrate or cause for caution?

As with anything in the realm of education politics, this conversation is rife with coded terminology and heavy doses of politicized rhetoric. Let's unpack some of it right now. "School choice," in the eyes of supporters, refers to the idea that students and their parents should be able to choose where they go to school. Their neighborhood public school happens to be unsafe, or poorly resourced? A family ought to be able to move schools to, say, a private Catholic school or a charter school or a wealthier school across town, even. School choice is the idea underlying movements toward deregulation, and the privatization, of the public education. School vouchers and the movement to replace public schools with charter schools are the outgrowth of this idea, which is typically espoused by conservative lawmakers and education advocates. The market, the thinking goes, can solve problems that government and public institutions have thus far failed to address.

It's also helpful to know who supports the deregulation of public education. This week, conservative education groups like the Heritage Foundation, Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice are celebrating [National School Choice Week](#) with what the website touts as more than 5,000 events whose aim is to amplify the need for more school choice. The Friedman Foundation released their annual ABCs of School Choice report ([PDF](#)), and this year matched every state's population of students who are eligible for school choice programs with their "purchasing power," that is, the public money that's being set aside for school vouchers and tax credits toward school choice. Much of the conversation is happening on Twitter, via the hashtags [#amplifychoice](#) and [#schoolchoiceweek](#).

But it's not just conservative groups behind this. More politically ambiguous groups like Michelle Rhee's StudentsFirst, have gotten in on National School Choice Week. Democrats and liberals are fond of turning to market principles as a way to save public education, too. Texas Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee joined Sen. Ted Cruz in Houston on Saturday for a school choice rally. Thousands turned up, the [Houston Chronicle](#) reported.

Turning to private entities to save public education is alluring precisely because public institutions truly are struggling to address equity in education. [Declining public investment](#) in education has only made this task harder by starving public schools and teachers of the resources

they need to do their jobs. As it is, the prevailing education reform effort in the country pits public schools against charter schools and each other for their survival. But advocates can't always deliver on the promises with choice. As progressive education advocates have long pointed out, at the heart of school choice is the mandate for competition. Charter schools tout their long waiting lists for entry and hold dramatic, heartbreaking admission lotteries, but students shouldn't need to compete for a coveted seat at a better school.

Progressive education advocates argue that people who really care about addressing the deep inequities in public education ought to invest in, not abandon, public institutions. Public school districts are the only institutions with the federal mandate, the capacity and very often the commitment to serve every single student—not just those whose parents have the social and economic capital to pull their kids out of the hardest-hit public schools.

But against this political backdrop and the day-to-day reality of public school life, which is increasingly defined by upheaval in the form of [mass school closures](#), [budget crises](#) and school safety issues, the promise of something, anything, different than public school life is often irresistible. According to the conservative [Cato Institute](#), the number of students taking part in school choice programs is at record highs: over 300,000, compared to 260,000 in the 2012-2013 year.

So maybe the question isn't are you or are you not celebrating this week. Maybe it's better to ask: is this the party you want to be at?