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Behind the Sloganeering of School Choice Week

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Choice in itself can seem to be a dangerous concept. After all, the mere act of choosing something does not make that act good. I can choose to kick the dog or pet him. The mere freedom to make a choice does not ensure its wisdom. So it seems a little trite to celebrate generic “school choice.”

Indeed, we already have universal school choice in the United States, in the sense that somebody, somewhere, gets to decide what choices the rest of us have to live with. Yet, as economist Thomas Sowell put it and has been encapsulated by [a tweet circulating from the Cato Institute](#) this School Choice Week: “It is hard to imagine a more stupid or dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong.”

Yes, we have school choice in this country – we have centralized school choice. Bureaucratized school choice. Central planning. The few, the proud, the paper-pushers making whatever decisions please them.

Let’s review why this doesn’t work. Government officials are no more or less fallible than the rest of us. We are all human. We make mistakes. This is an observation far older than James Madison’s discussion of it [in *Federalist Paper No. 10*](#). And if a bureaucrat or lawmaker makes a mistake, he harms thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people. If I make a mistake, at most I will harm myself and a handful of others. And if I make a mistake in my own life, I am strongly motivated to fix it quickly, given the personal pain mistakes usually inflict. It is far less likely that I will double down on my mistake than that a bureaucrat, whose interest is to protect his sinecure, not get things right, will.

Further, as Sowell indicates, people make even worse decisions when they’re not making decisions about their own affairs. If my dad sends me on a shopping spree with his credit card, I’m going to spend far more than if I were using my own. Rarely in human history has giving a few people the power to make choices on behalf of everyone increased the likelihood of good results.

So yes, celebrate school choice, this week and always, but not generically. Celebrate the individual freedom to choose. Celebrate, as Howard Fuller calls it, parent choice: the right and responsibility of individuals to govern the affairs of themselves and their families.