

David Dickey: School choice saves dollars, makes sense

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Story Highlights

Kids would get more, for less, with vouchers for private schools.

National School Choice Week (Jan. 23-29) has come, and nearly gone, with little notice. That is understandable since few of us have heard of it, and not all who have are interested.

But should we be? Government officials, school administrators, teachers, concerned parents – they all, it seems, lament the quality of education that our younger generations are receiving. So what are the solutions, and do they have anything to do with school choice? Many believe so.

The standard solution advocated by most local, state, and national public officials, including President Barack Obama, is greater "investment" in our schools (i.e., government spending financed by taxes). However, the historical record tells a different tale. According to the Cato Institute, national K-12 education spending nearly tripled from 1970-2006, while high school 17-year-olds' test scores were virtually unchanged.

Maybe more spending is not always the best solution. Maybe we ought to consider reasonable, cost-saving alternatives.

As for the cost of elementary education, the Cato Institute has identified widespread misrepresentation by public school administrators. In each of the 18 major U.S. school districts that were evaluated, school officials publicly reported the cost per student to be less than actual school district expenses – often far less.

The true figures were reduced simply by excluding important categories of taxpayer financed expenditures. Costs such as interest payments, paid retirement benefits, even athletics, were ignored. In Los Angeles County, the reported annual cost per student was \$10,053, while the county's own records showed the total to be \$25,208 per student.

With a tuition voucher in hand for \$25,000, virtually any child, regardless of race, family income or religious (or nonreligious) belief could attend any of a number of prestigious private schools of unquestionably superior quality to public schools.

There are numerous and varied motivations behind public officials' pervasive misrepresentations of the cost of educating our youth – many of which are obvious, and

many not so. As for school choice alternatives, less fraud among self-serving public servants and lower taxes are but two of the potential advantages.

While the quality of private school educations is a topic of debate, few would argue that private school performance is below that of public schools. Moreover, a school-choice voucher costing a good deal less than the typical annual cost of a public school education, say \$8,000 (most likely even less), would enable students in most states to attend their choice of a number of private schools – both religious and secular. And this would save considerable taxpayer dollars. Even people without children ought to applaud this result.

Presently, a family that opts for school choice must pay a harsh "choice penalty." Although their student will impart no cost burden to the local school district (and their absence will contribute to smaller class sizes), the family still must pay their "fair share" in taxes. There is no opting out, for any reason (except for some disadvantaged). And, of course, the family must foot the entire bill for their child's alternative education.

Finally, a point most often considered irrelevant by school administrators and other public officials: School choice enhances personal freedom. Why, if it is reasonably possible and presents no harm to their neighbor, should any family not have a choice as to how their child is educated – particularly if that choice results in a savings to other taxpayers? More than serious consideration, does not school choice merit a real-world audition?

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