



Daily Mail WV

Amanda Kieffer: School choice a way to improve West Virginia's economy (Daily Mail Opinion)

Amanda Kieffer

January 18, 2019

With a stubborn unemployment rate and significant pockets of poverty, West Virginia needs every economic boost it can get.

Thankfully, one policy solution could lead to economic growth — if we can embrace it. This National School Choice Week, which runs from Jan. 20 through Jan. 26, we should recognize school choice as one important ingredient necessary to revitalizing the West Virginia economy.

At present, the educational system in West Virginia needs major improvement. Results from standardized tests put the state below many of its peers on the “nation’s report card.” For instance, in eighth grade only about one-quarter of students could achieve levels of proficiency in math (24 percent) or reading (28 percent). And only two percent of West Virginia students — one in 50 — achieved advanced levels in reading.

Moreover, the West Virginia school system is wildly inefficient in its school spending. According to the Cato Institute’s recent study on K-12 education spending efficiency, West Virginia is ranked 51st, bottom of the barrel, when factoring in cost of living. That means that not only does the West Virginia system achieve woeful outcomes, it does so at a disproportionately high cost to the often-forgotten taxpayers in an already economically burdened state.

Thankfully, school choice can help. At present, West Virginia is one of only four states that has zero school choice options. Only parents who can afford to home school their children or pay out of pocket for private school tuition have choices. Expanding school choice programs in West Virginia would mean that families would no longer be trapped by their ZIP code.

But consider what would happen if West Virginia allowed for the creation of an education savings account program (ESA). This would allow parents to direct the education dollars spent on their child toward the opportunities best fitted to their family’s individual circumstances.

In the same way that we can custom order a variety of goods and services in our modern lives, ESA’s would similarly allow families to customize their student’s education. Private tutoring, extracurricular activities, and educational therapy are just some of the options these savings accounts could provide to West Virginia families.

School choice programs bring with them impressive results. One recent analysis looked at a series of studies, each of which compared students who won a lottery to receive a school choice scholarship with students who did not win and therefore remained in their neighborhood schools.

Among these 18 studies evaluating the impact of school choice, 14 found that choice improves student outcomes, and none showed worsened outcomes.

Moreover, permitting parents to select private schools does not undermine public education — to the contrary, it enhances it. Fully 31 of 33 studies found that private school choice increases public school outcomes. In many cases, school choice provides an impetus for public schools to “up their game” and improve performance. School choice does all this while also saving taxpayers money — literally billions of dollars, in fact.

During National School Choice Week, parents, teachers, and students will gather at more than 40,000 events the week of Jan. 20-26. These events will feature heartwarming stories of children who can testify to the ways in which their new schools helped make learning fun and improved their performance.

We should use the opportunity National School Choice Week presents to redouble our efforts to implement choice right here in West Virginia.

In addition to inspiring students, added choice would improve the quality of our workforce, bringing benefits that would last for generations to come. School choice could prove the key that unlocks a brighter future for West Virginia’s economy — if only we can make it happen.