

## **MaineWire: Empower Maine families with school choice**

Adam Crepeau

May 8, 2019

Quite often we hear politicians and special interests say that the quality of a child's education should not be determined by his or her zip code. This is most commonly followed by calls for hundreds of millions of dollars in additional state funding for public education which, according to these entities, is the only way we can improve our schools.

But the best way to ensure the quality of a child's education is not determined by zip code is to give families school choice – the opportunity to choose at which school a child will receive an education. This flexibility gives families the ability to place a child at the school that is the best fit for the student, a privilege few Maine families currently enjoy.

LD 1227, sponsored by Rep. Jeff Hanley, gets Maine closer to school choice by allowing all parents to request a change in enrollment to another school district for any reason. Current statute limits requests to students who reside in a district that does not maintain a school or contract with another district for school privileges, as well as students who are unable to find a school willing to enroll them.

Unfortunately, Rep. Hanley's bill does not guarantee choice, but it would give families the option to petition the education commissioner to have a student enrolled at an institution where they can better succeed. This change is truly not a heavy lift; it would just allow all parents to participate in the process as it currently exists. If the request is approved, the school administrative unit where a student resides would be responsible for paying the student's tuition.

Rep. Hanley's bill would help to ensure children receive the education they deserve. In 2018, 71 percent of Americans were satisfied with their oldest child's education and only 48 percent were satisfied with the quality of education in the United States overall. School choice would serve to alleviate dissatisfaction with our education system by giving parents the power to enroll their children at a school of which they personally approve.

Opponents of LD 1227 will likely claim the bill is merely a scheme to bolster private schools and public charters. However, research from open enrollment in Colorado showed that traditional public schools are the most popular school choice option for students. The report also found that high-performing districts were more likely to attract outside students. Some may view this as harmful to schools by potentially reducing enrollment, but it would create incentive for districts to be more attractive to families.

Ultimately, LD 1227 would create much-needed competition in our education system. According to Erin Kane, the superintendent at Douglas County Schools in Colorado, "open enrollment

keeps you on your toes. It forces you to be the best school district you can be, and forces your schools to be the best schools they can be.” If our schools became competitive, we could focus more on student outcomes rather than public funding.

Providing a pathway to school choice would also enable Maine families to send their kids to a school that is tailored to their needs. For example, a student with a particular interest in a STEM field may receive the education best suited for them at the Baxter Academy of Science and Technology. Similarly, parents who believe their district is not doing enough to address bullying would be able to send their child to another school, which has proven to be effective for students in these situations. In short, there are countless reasons why students and parents may want more school choice, and there is no reason why the state should stand in the way of this freedom.

The Cato Institute conducted a meta-analysis of 19 studies on 11 school choice programs that concluded increased school choice has statistically significant positive effects on student performance. Because education plays an important role in alleviating poverty, choice can be particularly beneficial to low-income students. While wealthier families have the financial resources to purchase homes in areas with good schools or send a student to private school, low-income families typically have fewer options and must settle with local schools, regardless of their success. With choice, low-income students get an opportunity to attend schools that are currently out of reach.

Sometimes the best bills are the simplest ones. Rep. Hanley’s bill makes a small change to existing law that could have a huge impact on the future of Maine children. Because parents should have the right to choose which school their child attends, lawmakers should move forward with LD 1227 this legislative session and explore additional ways to expand school choice in Maine.