

Forbes

A Return To St. Benedict's Prep On '60 Minutes': 7 Myths About School Vouchers

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Earlier this month “60 Minutes” profiled St. Benedict’s Prep School, a 148-year-old Catholic high school for boys that’s thriving in the heart of Newark, N.J. I couldn’t help but ask: Why are Democrats against allowing poor boys to attend this great school?

President Barack Obama and presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have made it clear they oppose vouchers for low-income families to use at private schools. They echo the sentiments of the teachers’ unions, which adamantly object to changing the age-old style of school funding. The major teachers’ unions have already endorsed Clinton.

The emails and comments, both pro and con, rolled in over the past week. There were a few recurring themes and myths, so I thought I would address them here.

1. *“The public schools can be made effective if enough resources are put into them and the surrounding communities and if teachers are paid better wages.”*

The starting salary in Newark is just over \$51,000 for a first-year teacher just out of college, according to the 2012-15 contract posted on the district’s website. A 40-year-old who started at 22 is now making over \$93,000. Teachers rated “highly effective” get a \$5,000 one-time bonus and are eligible for up to \$7,500 extra if they teach hard-to-staff subjects such as science, math and languages in the lowest performing schools.

Newark is not, however, the highest paying district in the state. The teachers’ union in the Freehold Regional district prides itself on being the first district in the state to top the \$60,000 mark for starting salaries. The state teachers’ union, the NJEA, chalked up that victory to an “early, strong show of force.”

2. *“What makes schools like St. Benedict’s special is that they operate outside this regulatory framework and are not dragged down. You are asking them to become a public school by accepting vouchered students.”*

Supporters of school choice do differ on how to avoid issues of government regulation of private schools that accept vouchers. [Here](#) is a good debate on the issue from 10 years ago. Cato Institute education policy analyst Andrew Coulson, who died last month, argued back then that tax credits, rather than government-funded vouchers, are the way to go:

A complete education tax credit program has two parts: a credit for parents to use against their own expenses, and a credit for individuals and businesses who donate to private Scholarship-Granting Organizations (SGOs). The first part helps middle-income families pay for their own children's schooling, and the second part ensures that low-income families also have the resources they need to participate in the education marketplace. Under this system, no one is compelled to fund anything to which they might object. The personal credits involve people spending their own money on themselves, and the donation credits allow taxpayers to choose the SGO that receives their donations. No government money is used. Taxpayer accountability is also far greater under tax credits than either vouchers or government schooling. If you don't like the way a particular SGO is allocating your money, you can redirect your donations elsewhere. Try doing that with your tax payments.

3. *"We need to make sure every child has an opportunity to succeed, not just special few."*

To me, that's an argument for more school-choice options, not fewer. The late economist Milton Friedman explained in 2003: "Our goal is to have a system in which every family in the U.S. will be able to choose for itself the school to which its children go. We are far from that ultimate result. If we had that – a system of free choice – we would also have a system of competition, innovation, which would change the character of education."

4. *"Dear Lord. It's the zombie idea that refuses to die: school vouchers. The premise, of course, is that a school like St. Benedict's can easily be scaled up, so more students can be saved from our horrible, failing, union-corrupted public schools."*

A friend of mine has a son who is a senior at a top-rated suburban public high school in New Jersey. The whole four-year experience, he says, has been mediocre. It didn't help when the unionized teachers had a work slowdown to protest stalled contract negotiations. I will quote him when it comes to naysayers (like the teacher who blogged the quote above) who doubt that the St. Benedict's model can be scaled up: "If they can scale up mediocrity, why can't they scale up success?"

5. *"President Obama, Hillary and all the Democrats DO want the same for other children as they do their own but have to fight with Republicans to get anything done, especially when it comes to education."*

As soon as he took office in 2008, President Obama worked to kill the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship, a federally funded voucher program in that allows low-income families in Washington, D.C., to attend Catholic and other private schools. Results from the program show that voucher recipients graduate at a higher rate than public school students and are more likely to go on to college. The program, which currently serves 1,244 students in 40 participating private schools, was resurrected by Republicans in Congress in 2011. Scholarships are up to \$12,572 for high school and up to \$8,381 for elementary and middle school. With help like that

and financial aid, a poor boy could attend St. Alban's, where Al Gore went to school. The scholarship program is funded this year, but its future is in doubt.

6. *"The '60 Minutes' story was touching but how many scam schools would pop up if taxpayer money was thrown out on the table?"*

I will quote Casey Lartigue, a former education policy analyst at the Cato Institute: "The difference between fly-by-night public schools and fly-by-night private schools is that fly-by-night private schools are accurately described—they truly "fly away" when they lose their customers. But fly-by-night public schools stubbornly continue trying to fly, even when it turns out they are ostriches."

7. *"I don't want my tax dollars in an institution that promotes religion."*

The Supreme Court, in its 2002 *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* decision, ruled 5-4 that the Cleveland, Ohio, school voucher plan did not violate the First Amendment's prohibition on the establishment of a state religion. The vouchers were available to all types of schools, not just religious ones. The vouchers were also given to the parents, "who made their own choices about enrollment, and not to the schools directly.