

# The Weirton Daily Times

## West Virginia should fund students, not institutions

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West Virginia policymakers have a golden opportunity to finally put the educational needs of the state's students front-and-center.

House Bill 2013 – which just passed out of the House and is currently on its way to the Senate – would allow nearly all families in the state to take a portion of their children's K-12 dollars to the public or private education provider of their choice. This would empower families to find the educational environment that works best for their students and not simply fund traditional institutions, as the state has done for years.

Funding students directly is nothing new for higher education and early childhood programs in West Virginia. Pell Grants, the GI Bill, the West Virginia Higher Education Grant, and the West Virginia Promise Scholarship all provide funds to higher education students who can use them at the college of their choice. The same goes for early childhood programs such as Head Start programs and West Virginia Universal Pre-K which grants funds to families.

Oddly enough, supporters of funding students directly when it comes to higher education and pre-K generally reject providing the same benefits to students while they attend K-12 schools. What is the reason behind this apparent logical inconsistency? The difference may well be one of power dynamics. School choice is the norm when it comes to both higher education and pre-K. But that same choice can threaten special interests in traditional K-12 education spheres who have long gotten children's education dollars regardless of how well they serve students' needs.

Not surprisingly, defenders of the public school monopoly fiercely resist allowing families to take their children's education dollars elsewhere. Unfortunately, they often repeatedly invoke untrue claims to do so, even though these claims fall apart under just modest scrutiny.

The number one argument from defenders of the status quo is that school choice "*defunds*" public schools. But the basic reality is that public school systems use families' taxpayer dollars to begin with. Choice initiatives simply return funds to families, and let the people the money is intended to serve make decisions for themselves.

Allowing families to choose their school doesn't "*defund*" public schools any more than allowing families to choose a different grocery store "*defunds*" Kroger. The goal should be to educate children, not prop up particular institutions.

And why would giving families a choice automatically "*defund*" public schools, anyway? The argument itself is a huge concession, assuming that lots of families would prefer something other than their assigned public schools.

But that's not all. West Virginia's public schools spend an average of \$12,644 per child per year, while the estimated amount of funding that would follow the child under HB 2013 would be about \$4,600. If the legislation becomes law, public schools would keep large amounts of funding for children even after they left, meaning they would end up with more money per child. Imagine if Kroger were able to keep a substantial portion of your grocery budget even after you started shopping at Walmart. That would be a fantastic deal for Kroger. This competition may be why 26 of 28 studies – and the most comprehensive peer-reviewed meta-analysis – find that school choice generally leads to better outcomes in nearby public schools. And five studies find that competition leads to higher salaries for public school teachers.

School choice is that rising tide that lifts all boats. Some choice opponents in the state are also claiming that \$4,600 is too low to cover private school tuition. But do those same people oppose Pell Grants just because they don't cover the full cost of attending many universities? Or food stamps just because they might not cover the full grocery bill? Of course not. Some assistance is better than none at all.

And \$4,600 would actually go a long way in West Virginia as the average private school tuition in the state is just \$6,068 and the average elementary school cost is \$4,890. Of course, we could give families a larger portion of their children's education dollars – let's say half – but then those same opponents would almost certainly invoke the “*defunding*” myth even more loudly. The worst thing about anti-school choice myths is that they disproportionately prevent the least advantaged from access to much needed education options. Advantaged families can afford to live in the neighborhoods assigned to the best “*public*” schools, pay for private school tuition, or cover the costs of home-based education.

Funding students directly allows far more families to access these alternatives.

Don't let baseless claims block educational opportunities for West Virginia children. Fund students, not institutions.

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