There's a simple solution to parental battles over cultural matters

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A recent *Washington Post* article underlined liberal parents fighting conservative parents over which side should control public schools . Should boys who identify as girls be allowed to play on girls' sports teams and shower in girls' locker rooms? Should kindergartners learn about transgenderism in school? At what age should children have access to sex-themed books in school libraries? As the article shows, parents on opposing sides of the political spectrum have very different answers to these questions.

Perhaps inadvertently, the article really serves to highlight something else entirely: Public schools — which are, by definition , government-run schools — will always involve political fights. It's the nature of the beast.

For the most part, our current education system assigns children to public schools based solely on where they live. A student's individual needs, preferences, or abilities are generally not part of the equation. But parents can do a lot to overcome these issues through tutoring, having a child move up or down a grade, or supplementing the school day with extracurricular activities that align with their child's interests.

When it comes to a family's values, though, the stakes are quite different. Sending their children every day to a school that opposes their values is untenable for many parents. In the current public school system, the only recourse for most parents is to wage political battles. Then, when one side wins on any given point, the other side will have to wage a counterfight for their values to prevail. It's a never-ending cycle.

The Cato Institute's Public Schooling Battle Map illustrates this phenomenon going back decades. It catalogs battles from public schools around the country, with a focus on fights involving basic rights, moral values, or individual identities. While many people think public schools will bring people together and foster unity, the reality is often the opposite. Forcing adults to fund and children to attend one school system also forces parents to engage in political fights to ensure their voices are heard when it comes to their children's education.

It doesn't have to be this way. When states began establishing public schools in the 1800s, it probably made sense to build a school and assign children to it based on where they lived. Travel and communication were very difficult. But we don't live in that world anymore. We can now

transition to a system where funding follows students to the learning environments that work best for them.

Many states are already making progress on this goal. There are now school choice programs in 32 states plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. This includes vouchers for private school tuition, tax credits to help offset tuition, and tax credit scholarships that provide tax credits for donations to scholarship organizations.

But the programs that best exemplify funding following students are education savings accounts, which direct a portion of state education dollars to accounts that parents can use for education-related expenses such as tuition, curriculum, tutors, and services for special needs. With ESAs, parents can truly customize their children's education to meet their individual needs.

The *Washington Post* article is correct that battles over parents' rights when it comes to education are heating up. Removing the winner-takes-all aspect of the current public school system, by letting parents choose the educational environment for their children, can dramatically reduce the heat around these topics. It won't result in a peaceful utopia in which the culture wars go away, but it will equip parents to provide their children with an education that doesn't run counter to their deeply held values.

That seems like a goal with which most parents, on the Right and the Left, can agree.

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