



School choice can take political fights out of education

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If you live in a state that held primaries last week, you're probably sick of political ads. In my home state of Pennsylvania, millions were spent on the governor's race alone—and millions more will be spent leading up to the general election in November.

Much of the contention in these races revolved around education issues. From teaching sex education in young grades to lessons about racial issues to COVID-19 policies, education is a hot topic. Since opinions about these issues often fall along party lines, the general election is likely to be even more contentious.

What if there's a better way? What if we could take most of the political fights out of education?

We can. The current winner-takes-all system forces parents to engage in political battles to get their children the education they think is best. But when one group of parents “wins,” that means another group loses.

School choice—letting education dollars follow children to the option that works best for them—is the answer. When parents can choose where and how their children will be educated, they're no longer at the mercy of politicians and bureaucrats. That means they don't have to rely on political battles when it comes to education.

Plus, school choice is very popular among parents and voters in general. Consider education savings accounts (ESAs). ESAs are the most flexible form of school choice, allowing parents to direct a portion of their children's education funding for things like tutoring, tuition, curriculum, and services for children with special needs. Parental support for ESAs has been 84 to 86 percent in the last few years.

But parental choice in education isn't just good politics; it's good policy. Looking at nearly 170 empirical studies on the impacts of school choice shows very strong positive impacts—on test scores, educational attainment, parental satisfaction, civic practices, and fiscal effects. Very few of the studies (6.5 percent) showed negative impacts.

So why don't most states have widespread school choice if there's robust support for it and it works well?

Teachers unions are the biggest roadblock to widespread school choice. In addition to backing candidates who oppose school choice, they actively campaign to stop school choice legislation in states.

Beyond that, most people grew up attending their assigned district school, so it's easy to just think that's the way education works. But the origins of assigning children to schools based on where they live isn't some magic formula designed to ensure the best education possible. The reason for residential assignment is quite simple—the system was designed in the 1800s, when travel and communication were very difficult.

We haven't faced those limitations for a long time. And after schools were closed in response to COVID-19, parents are seeing how many options there really are when it comes to education. Pandemic pods, microschoools, hybrid schools, and other private schools—parents who never looked beyond their local district school are suddenly seeing education in a new light. And many want to stick with these new options.

School choice policies can ensure parents across the income spectrum have access to these new options. By letting education funding follow students—rather than being locked in any one system—families will be able to choose the education that works for them.

Education has major lifelong impacts on children. Given state mandates and taxpayer funding of education in the U.S., the ability to decide what that education looks like shouldn't be reserved to the wealthy. It's worth noting that the U.S. is an outlier in its reliance on assigned schooling. In most democratic countries, parents can use public funding for a variety of schooling options—including religious schools.

Last year was widely dubbed the “year of educational choice,” with new or expanded education choice policies passed in 18 states. So far, this year has been quieter—while dozens of school choice bills have been introduced, only a few have been enacted.

But parents aren't going away. They know they need different options to meet their children's needs, and they're learning how to advocate for those options. By enacting more policies that let education funding follow students, lawmakers can help families get the education they need while reducing political fights.

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