

## More School Choice Gives Baltimore Kids A Chance

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The violence in Baltimore has left many wondering what can be done to improve the lives of young Americans growing up in the inner city, where the path often leads to the unemployment line or worse. Education reform — and school choice, in particular — is an emerging policy option that is drawing growing support from across the political spectrum. Though Baltimore has school choice options, more opportunities for the city's students are needed.

Education activist Jeanne Allen tweeted that "Baltimore riots and community dysfunction remind us that we must fix school and make #edreform a reality 4 all. #Charterschools save cities." The Washington Post's Charles Krauthammer stated on Fox News Channel that American inner cities have "the worst schools on earth" and noted, "If you can't improve the schools, give the kids a choice to go to better schools.

The idea of school choice was introduced in 1955 by Nobel Prize winner and libertarian economist Milton Friedman and developed more fully in his book "Free to Choose." Though Friedman favored a completely private educational system, he saw the voucher system as a positive step away from the inherently flawed government system. At its core is the notion that every child deserves a high-quality education and every parent deserves to choose where and how his or her child receives it.

The various options (vouchers, education savings accounts, scholarships funded by tax credits, and individual tax breaks) all come with pros and cons, but the fundamental point is that parents should be allowed to extract their kids from failing public schools and enroll them in the institution of their choice — an option that wealthier parents already possess.

Baltimore would appear to be a prime candidate for greater school choice. Its unemployment rate is 8.4%, which is well above the state of Maryland's rate of 5.4%. And testing scores show that the system is failing too many children. Columnist Terry Jeffrey noted that in 2013, "only 16%

of the eighth graders in the Baltimore City Public Schools scored at or above grade-level proficient in the NAEP reading test. That same year, only 13 percent of the eighth graders in the Baltimore City Public Schools scored at or above grade-level proficient in math."

Those figures "were lower than the national public school averages, lower than the Maryland averages, and lower than the averages for the nation's large cities."

This dismal achievement is not for lack of funding. In the 2014-15 school year, Baltimore's 188 city schools and programs will have spent \$1.34 billion, including about \$140 million from the federal government, for an enrollment of 84,976 students. That's approximately \$16,000 per pupil. According to Census Bureau data (2012 data are the most recent), that level of per-pupil spending would be second only to New York City among the 100 largest districts nationwide by enrollment.

Students and parents in Baltimore deserve better. Reached by email, Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, told me, "The evidence is clear that private school choice would provide as good or better academic results for a fraction of what Baltimore currently spends."

He did caution, however, that "it is also quite clear that what a child experiences outside of school — poverty, broken families, etc. — has more impact on education than what schools themselves do."

Though it would not be a silver bullet, expanding private school choice in Baltimore — as is successfully occurring in other cities around the country — would give parents the incentive to play a more active role in their kids' education and give these children a better shot at escaping the poverty and violence that surround them.