



The school choice movement picks up steam

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Private school choice is sharply on the rise. According to Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute, 1.6 million new school choice slots opened up in 2021. A 2022 Arizona law opened up about 1 million more.

McCloskey writes:

To put that in perspective, in the 2020–21 school year, 660,085 students were using private choice programs. Add those to potential new ones, and the total could increase to almost 3.3 million. And early this year, Iowa and Utah passed new universal programs, with similar legislation filed in several other states.

Perhaps the most important news on this front is that school choice isn't just for Republicans any longer. The first evidence of this came in the Florida governor's race of 2018 which Ron DeSantis' won by around 30,000 votes. According to an analysis cited by McCluskey, DeSantis collected roughly 60,000 more votes from black women than would have been predicted by black men's votes for DeSantis and black women's votes for Republicans in other elections.

Why? Probably because of the large number of low-income students in Florida who either participated in the Step Up for Students program, which grants tax-credit funded scholarships to attend private schools, or were enrolled in the state's charter schools.

Most Step Up students are minorities whose mothers are registered Democrats. It looks like, party affiliation notwithstanding, many of these "school-choice moms" voted for DeSantis to protect their ability to choose where their child goes to school.

Given this dynamic, it's not altogether surprising that some Democrats now run on a pro-school choice platform, to one degree or another:

In Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro endorsed Lifeline Scholarships for kids in poorly performing public schools, saying, "I'm for making sure we give parents the ability to put their kids in the best situation for them to be able to succeed. And I'm for making sure we add scholarships like Lifeline Scholarships to make sure that that's additive to their educations."

J. B. Pritzker, the incumbent governor of Illinois, ran on ending the state's scholarship tax credit in 2018 and twice attempted to shrink the credit. In 2022, he changed his tune, at least a bit, answering "yes" to the candidate survey question, "Do you support Illinois' tax credit scholarship program that provides financial support for students to attend private and parochial schools?" Pritzker's support was tepid—he said that he would keep the program because it is "relatively small" and that he believed its supporters would endorse more overall education funding—but it was nonetheless a clear change from four years earlier.

The real game-changer, though, was Covid. McCluskey cites an estimate that enrollment in traditional public schools fell by 15 percent from in the period from the beginning of the pandemic until the spring of 2022. During the same period, charter school enrollment rose 57 percent, private school enrollment grew 28 percent, and homeschooling rose 126 percent.

Compare this with the very modest changes that occurred in the period from 1999 until the pandemic. In 1999, 74.1 percent of school-aged children attended their assigned public school, 14.3 percent were in public schools of choice such as magnet or charter schools, 10 percent were in private schools, and 1.7 percent were homeschooled. By 2019, 70.8 percent attended assigned schools, 16.8 percent were in chosen public schools, 9.3 percent were in private schools, and 2.8 percent were homeschooled.

Clearly, Covid brought about a sea change.

Will things change back now that the pandemic is over? Probably not. Will the movement away from public schools continue? Probably, but not at anything approaching the 2021 rate.

McCluskey offers "tempered optimism" for the future of school choice:

What is perhaps most in the school choice movement's long-term favor is that growth tends to cement itself, creating a broader baseline than before from which to work. Once a program of any kind is in place, it gets a constituency that becomes highly motivated to defend and advance it. For school choice in particular, not only does it get that, but any politician who seeks to dismantle it has to accept being the face of efforts to kick children out of schools that have been their educational homes. This is a major reason that since 1990— when the first modern voucher program was established in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—there has not been a year in which the number of active private school choice programs nationwide has declined, save for consolidations into bigger programs, as happened in Florida and North Carolina in 2022. The reach of choice has consistently grown.

It is hard to conclude that educational freedom has turned a corner from exception to norm. But it has made huge progress over the last few years, and it is almost certainly here not just to stay but to flourish.

Let's hope so. In a country where dozens of schools in certain large cities can't produce even one student who performs at grade level in math, educational freedom isn't just desirable, it's imperative.