

Roll Call



Presenting the Case for School Choice

By Jason Stverak - Jan. 28, 2013

Year after year, studies release details how America's education system is floundering. Test scores are on the decline, and math and science programs are failing. Despite an abundance of research and strong indicators for options that can help heal education in the United States, our government — at the state and federal levels — unfortunately continues to pour taxpayer money into a deteriorating infrastructure.

Sadly, Congress is sitting idly by, afraid to disrupt the status quo for fear of political retribution. A 2009 survey found that at least 44 percent of senators and 36 percent of representatives sent their children to private schools, and close to 20 percent of the members themselves attended private high schools. Unfortunately, many of them argued against giving the same opportunity to their constituents.

Now, with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act up for reauthorization, Congress has the opportunity to revolutionize how we approach education and invest in methods that work, as opposed to pursuing the same policies and simply throwing more resources at the problem.

Forcing parents to send their children to schools that fail to provide the tools they need to excel and denying them the option to choose which educational program is best suited for a child's specific learning needs is the chief reason our children suffer. Let's offer them a choice.

National School Choice Week, from Jan. 27 to Feb. 2, promotes a common-sense notion that gives parents the freedom to choose their child's educational environment, regardless of where they live or how much money they have.

By using public funds already set aside for education and allowing parents to choose the best option for their child, each student can receive a unique educational approach that is tailored to his or her needs. There are a variety of approaches that offer parents the option to send their children to any school, whether it is public or private, religious or secular, or brick-and-mortar or online.

Research shows that school choice programs are creating positive results. A report from The Heritage Foundation revealed that students in school choice programs graduate at significantly higher rates than their public school peers. In fact, researchers have found that 9 in 10 studies show positive academic gains for school choice students.

Not only do these programs create positive student outcomes, parents are increasingly satisfied with their children's schools when they have the freedom to make a choice. More than 90

percent of parents whose children participated in the McKay Scholarship program — a program for special-needs children in Florida — reported they were content with their children's schools in comparison with only 33 percent of parents whose special-needs children attended public schools.

The majority of today's school districts dictate the conditions of education for students and schools, while taxpayers settle the bill. But even public school students have something to gain from school choice programs. As more private schools began participating, researchers found an increase in public school achievement as a result of the competitive pressure.

K-12 education is the top spending item in nearly every state budget and per-pupil spending has increased more than 65 percent over the past 25 years, according to the Digest of Education Statistics. The Cato Institute reports public schools are spending 93 percent more than the estimated median private school.

School choice has helped struggling state budgets and saved taxpayers millions. The Commonwealth Foundation reported that virtual school programs saved Pennsylvania taxpayers more than \$146 million in a year by preventing school overcrowding and lessening costly construction projects.

Currently, each state's school choice program differs, and while some have offered multiple options for parents, others have refused parents these programs entirely — effectively taking away their freedom of choice.

This session, as Congress re-examines our education policies, let's leave everything on the table. Instead of providing grants that only benefit the public school system, Congress needs to expand funding incentives to charter schools and vouchers for private schools. Our one-size-fits-all approach to education at the federal level is falling flat, and our situation will only improve if we stop pumping resources into a broken system and invest in options with proven results and unlimited potential.

Offering parents the opportunity to choose an educational program that is committed to the success of their child is the key to creating a positive and thriving learning environment around the country.