



## **Why school choice for Texas? A more free and peaceful state**

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) has called a special session of the legislature to tackle school choice, something that the red state has seen proposed — and defeated — before. The debate has been heavily focused on school funding and nebulous threats of choice to rural public schools. These are important concerns.

Still, they should be sideshows compared to the interest Texans have in school choice: freedom and peace.

School choice legislation passed by the state senate would create an education savings account (ESA) program. Each account would receive \$8,000 from the state at a total price tag of about \$500 million over two years. ESAs enable families to pay for private schools, but also much more, including tutoring and therapies. A few days ago, Abbott announced a deal with House leadership for ESA's worth \$10,400 per recipient, but as of the time of this writing no total cost estimate was available.

Cost should be put into context. In fiscal year 2021 the state spent \$23.6 billion on elementary and secondary education. The Senate bill's \$500 million price tag is only 2.1 percent of that. The House bill's cost could be smaller. But smaller is not better --the amounts should be very large because choice injects liberty -- the indispensable American value -- into education. It also fosters social harmony, which is sorely needed in Texas and beyond.

Texas, along with Florida, has been ground zero in the culture war that has embroiled school districts and capitols around the country. The state, among other things, has the second-highest

number of challenges to books such as *Gender Queer* — a graphic novel containing images of sexual activity — behind only the Sunshine State. In fact, before *Gender Queer* became a national target with Virginia mother Stacy Langton's incendiary public comments before her district's board of education, Langton said she had seen "pornography" challenged in Leander, Texas.

Soon after Langton's call to arms, State Sen. Matt Krause (R) drew national headlines when he sent a list of roughly 850 books centered on race and sexuality to every Texas school district, asking whether they had the titles and how much they spent on them.

The ugly reality of public schooling is being laid bare: No matter how books and other controversies are addressed, freedom will be curbed. If a school stocks books such as *Gender Queer*, allows bathroom use based on gender identity, or requires that teachers use students' chosen pronouns, people morally opposed will suffer discrimination by the government. But purge offending books, or let public schools ignore a student's gender identity, and LGBTQ+ students and progressive families will be rendered second-class.

These equally unacceptable outcomes are forced by a system that requires people with diverse values to all pay for government-established and run schools. When values clash, members of each group must fight for political victory to get what they believe is right. School choice — *freedom* — is the solution. If money follows students instead of going directly to government schools, there is no zero-sum game. All, diverse families can seek for themselves what they think is best with no need to impose on their neighbors.

This is far better than public schooling. Foremost because freedom is intrinsically good. The ability to make one's own decisions — to choose what one thinks is right — is infinitely superior to forced conformity. Then comes peace. Move away from winner-take-all public schooling, and people with different values cease to be enemy combatants and become neighbors who might not agree on everything but who need not vanquish each other politically to get what they think is right.

This is not just theoretical. Choice in education has been embraced in numerous countries, having in many cases been implemented to defuse once incessant religious conflicts. Desire for

peaceful coexistence might also be why so far this year, seven states have adopted universal education freedom programs.

Liberty and peace are precious things. They should be front-and-center in Texas.

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