The Dark Side of School Choice

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Jumping straight to raising a teenager is like skipping straight to the sixth season of *LOST*: You miss out on all the fun and wonder of the early years and dive right into a hormonal melodrama that has no idea where it's going.

Last March I had my first parenting experience. A family situation sent my fiancé's 14-year-old brother, Kevin, from the West Coast to come live with us in Cincinnati for four months. There we were, a yuppie twentysomething couple, handed a child who had to be enrolled in high school in the middle of the year.

And it wasn't easy. For a time it looked as if the only way Kevin could attend school was if he enrolled as a "homeless youth" squatting in our house. To even get the legal authority to put him in school, my fiancé had to file for emergency custody at the juvenile court downtown, which she was denied on the grounds that Kevin was not in "imminent threat of physical harm" and that, since he was only going to be with us for a short time, jurisdiction actually belonged to Oregon, his home state. But since Oregon laws are much more lenient than those in Ohio, we were finally able to enroll him with a simple power of attorney form.

We exhaled a collective sigh of relief—which turned out to be very premature. As temporary parents, we wanted to make sure Kevin went to a good school. Luckily for us, we lived within walking distance of an acclaimed high school. But after reaching out to the staff there, we were informed that the school was "at capacity," and thus couldn't take another student in the seventh grade.

In most of the country's school districts, this wouldn't be a problem: Schools are never *full*. Attendence is based on geographic proximity, and even if a neighborhood is so dense that every class has 40 students, so be it—everyone gets to go to the closest school. In these districts, the success of the program usually provides a socio-economic snapshot of the surrounding area. In fact, a 2011 study in the American Sociological Review determined that growing up in an impoverished neighborhood significantly reduces the chances a child will graduate from high school at all, and that "the longer a child lives in that kind of neighborhood, the more harmful the impact." So how do you prevent an academically challenged school in a poor neighborhood from becoming a factory for failure?

Republicans, including several likely 2016 presidential contenders, have been aggressively championing school choice reforms as the small-government answer to providing kids from poor neighborhoods with higher quality education. The game plan calls for establishing more charter schools, distributing scholarships and vouchers to assist needy families with private school

tuition, and essentially implementing a system in which local students have options to take control of their education and avoid going to troubled nearby schools.

"Rich families already have school choice: They can afford to live in expensive neighborhoods or to send kids to private school. Poor families don't have those options, so they are stuck with the school assigned to them. It's a one-size-fits-all approach based on a student's geography," says Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst for the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "School Choice empowers parents to send kids to the school that works best for them, whether that's a school with a specialization such as technology or the arts, or a school with a higher graduation rate. It's a passport out of poverty."

In January, Republican senators Tim Scott of South Carolina and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee unveiled legislation that would allow states to use $24 billion in federal state education funds to expand school choice options. At the state level, similar proposals have cropped up nationwide; in Louisiana and Wisconsin, Republican governors Bobby Jindal and Scott Walker—both potential 2016 presidential candidates—have been locked in a protracted war with President Obama's Justice Department over their states' respective school voucher programs. Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, another presidential contender, has also been an especially enthusiastic cheerleader for school choice, speaking at forums and roundtables across the country where he has pushed a slate of education choice reforms designed to broaden his appeal beyond the traditional GOP base.

"Washington has no clue how to fix education," Paul told an audience at the National Urban League Convention in Cincinnati this summer. "Washington doesn't know whether you're a good teacher or a bad teacher. We should allow innovation to occur at the local level. I propose that we allow school charters, school choice, vouchers, competition. Competition breeds excellence and encourages innovation. And boy, we really need innovation."

But critics argue that school choice is akin to a boat captain jumping ship at the sight of an iceberg rather than just steering around it; in other words, the proposals avoid the hard work of actually improving failing schools, and instead funnel taxpayer money that are unaccountable to the federal government.

"Innovation in [existing public schools] is what we need," says Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president of the National Education Association, which represents nearly 3 million teachers and educators in the US. "Charters were originally supposed to be incubators for innovation. But then venture capitalists saw dollar signs and wanted in. These folks want to transfer money out of school budgets and into their pockets."

Like most people under 30, I'd never given any of this much thought. That is, until my fiancé and I were unexpectedly thrust into the morass of the US public education system when we found ourselves responsible for a teenager who couldn't enroll in high school. In Cincinnati, the public school district has implemented a hybrid school choice system, which lets students take control of their education by picking a high school based on interest or career focus regardless of where they live. Since it was first implemented in the early 2000s, the program has been touted as a success credited with a 12 percent improvement on state test scores in the district, and an

increase in graduation rates, from about 51 percent in 2000 to nearly 74 percent in 2013.

But the system also has a downside. In Kevin's case, administrators at the local high school told us that they had no obligation to take him, that they couldn't make any exceptions. According to the logic of school choice, he could just attend another secondary school that had space. But of the 15 secondary public schools in Cincinnati, nine have graduation rates below the national average (about 80 percent in 2012–2013, according to a the US Department of Education)—statistics that suggest the district's overall jump in graduation rates over the past decade might be skewed by a few high-performing schools.

We were faced with a choice: Kevin could take the city bus to a school nearly two hours across town, or he could attend the next closest high school with space—one that incidentally has 58 percent graduation rate and an F grade from the Ohio Department of Education. Neither seemed like a particularly good option.

Lots of kids have benefited tremendously from the Cincinnati school choice system. "I don't know how to say this without sounding like it's straight out of a rap video," said Gabriel Gibson, a 16-year-old from Cincinnati's crime-ridden Price Hill neighborhood who attends Walnut Hills High School, a nationally-ranked college prep school that requires students to pass an entrance exam. "I want to crawl out from the life I came from. I want to do better than my mom, my aunts. I want to influence change in the world." Now a junior, Gibson divides her time between high school and college courses, and has plans to earn a degree in bioengineering.

But while school choice incentivizes talented students to flee failing schools for better ones, it also sets up a catch-22: If good students are always leaving for better schools, it becomes increasingly difficult for schools to improve; and if schools never get better, then good students will continue to leave.

"I'm a huge advocate for neighborhood schools. When a school is local, students are inclined to take better care of it, have more pride and respect," said Craig Hockenberry, a former Cincinnati public school principal. Now the superintendent of a small school district in southwestern Ohio, he said he has mixed feelings on the school choice program in Cincinnati, where he worked from 2000 until 2013. "When I was growing up I went to our local high school. Businesses, churches, the whole neighborhood would come together to make the school better." With school choice, he added, "you risk losing that sense of community" because the system drives out young intelligent people from their neighborhoods.

All of which puts kids like Kevin, thrown into less than ideal educational circumstances beyond their control, at a constant disadvantage, exacerbating the very educational and social problems that the reforms were designed to resolve.