



Friday Freakout: Want an Educated Citizenry? Support School Choice

By Jason Bedrick
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“[The] future of our economy depends on a well educated citizenry,” [argued](#) Karen Patton of the League of Women Voters (LWV) in Montgomery County, Indiana in a recent op-ed. She concluded: “democratic government depends upon [citizens’] informed and active participation.”

I couldn’t agree more.

That’s why I think it’s a shame that the LWV “opposes the diversion of public funds to non-public schools through vouchers, tuition tax credits, tax deductions or choice scholarships.” If they truly support an educated and politically active citizenry, I wonder if they’ve examined the research on the type of education system that best instills civic values.

Fortunately, the Friedman Foundation published a [literature review](#) last year that addresses exactly that question. The review found that school choice laws actually enhance civic values and practices:

Seven empirical studies have examined school choice’s impact on civic values and practices such as respect for the rights of others and civic knowledge. Of these, five find that school choice improves civic values and practices. Two find no visible impact from school choice. No empirical study has found that school choice has a negative impact on civic values and practices.

It’s important to note that those studies don’t compare all of the students in public schools to all of the students in private schools. They compare two groups of students whose families are demographically, academically, and socioeconomically similar with one factor setting them apart from each other: school choice. How?

Four of the seven studies were conducted using a [random-assignment method](#). So all of the kids being compared were applicants of a school choice program. Some got a voucher, some didn’t, based on a random selection – a lottery. The other three studies were conducted using a matched method, where a random sample of voucher students was compared to a sample of area public school students of the same demographic, socioeconomic, and academic proportions as the voucher student sample.

With both methods, researchers were able to rule out any potentially skewed factors, such as parents’ affluence or level of involvement, more effectively.

One random-assignment study measured political tolerance by asking students to identify their least-liked group—such as the KKK, pro-life/choice supporters, people of different religions—and then asking them if they thought members of that group should be permitted to engage in civic activities such as giving a speech or running for office. Voucher students were more likely to display political tolerance.

Another study looked at the impact of school choice on families rather than just students. It found that, because they got a voucher, parents “were more likely to be actively involved in their children’s schools, parent-teacher organizations, and other education groups” than parents of students at traditional district schools with a similar demographic profile. The study also found that parents empowered by choice became “more likely to see a connection between education and the civic institutions of society, to say that their children were learning how government works, and to be involved themselves in civic activities.”

Patton is right to praise Indiana’s “proud history in the quest for universal education for all citizens.” But she should not ignore that Indiana’s proud history includes enacting two educational choice laws that help tens of thousands of students attend the schools of their choice. Rather than oppose such initiatives, Patton and the LWV should embrace them.

The Founding Fathers’ vision of a free and democratic nation depends on having educated citizens, but that vision never required we depend only on the government to educate them. Indeed as Neal McCluskey [wrote](#), “the only system of education that can effectively support a free society is one that is itself grounded in freedom.”

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