

# ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

## Private enterprise in education is no bogeyman

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We don't have government-run grocery stores, clothing outlets, coffee shops, automobile retailers, or smartphone stores. Each day we buy most of the goods and services we use from private sellers – entrepreneurs and enterprises that make the things we need and want. We often take this process of voluntary exchange for granted, not appreciating how valuable it is to have such magnificent choice and variety available to us every day, in most areas of our lives.

But when it comes to education, the assortment of options available to most families is alarmingly limited. The vast majority of children in the U.S. attend a government-run school, assigned to them based on their zip code. It is like being told that we must buy our bread from the one assigned market nearby, or our shoes from the government-run shoe factory in our neighborhood. We couldn't imagine such restrictions on food and clothing and other human necessities, but many of us routinely tolerate – even champion – restricting education choice.

Fortunately, the people of Arizona recognize that education, like food and clothing, is too important to be left to government providers alone. The state is a pioneer in education choice, enacting the first education savings account program in the country, as well as a variety of tax-credit scholarship programs that give children access to expanded education options. The number of Arizona children attending charter schools has also continued to climb over the years to nearly 200,000 students in over 500 schools, offering more choice beyond a district assignment.

This robust climate of educational freedom has led to a surge of innovation and entrepreneurship. Visionary parents and enterprising educators recognize mounting parent demand for more educational options, and build new learning models to satisfy that demand. Each model has its own features and its own approach, and Arizona parents can increasingly select the one that is the best fit for their child and family. A free and open education market is the best mechanism to meet the diverse preferences and needs of a pluralistic society.

Entrepreneurs are the ones who drive educational innovation to meet these diverse preferences and needs. They create possibilities that don't exist or they improve upon existing offerings to add value. Arizona entrepreneur, Kelly Smith, built the fast-growing network of Prenda micro-schools after feeling that the education his eight-year-old son and others were getting was more focused on coercion than on autonomy and self-determination. An MIT graduate who sold his software company in 2013, Smith launched Prenda with seven kids in his home in January 2018. Today, there are 80 Prenda micro-schools throughout Arizona, serving about 550 children in grades K-8.

At \$5,000 per student per year, Prenda micro-schools are a fraction of the cost of many other private options and about half the cost of the Arizona average per pupil expenditure. Most Prenda students receive access to educational funding through one of the state's education choice

mechanisms or through the Sequoia Choice charter program that supports distance learning models. In addition to costing less than traditional schooling, private alternatives like Prenda are much leaner, less bureaucratic, and more directly accountable to parents, who can leave if they are not satisfied. Liability concerns and operating costs are also shifted to private entities and out of the public domain, thus relieving taxpayers of these additional financial burdens.

Tom Bogle launched a Prenda school in his Maricopa home earlier this year. A former public high school teacher, Bogle left the classroom after five years of teaching because he thought that the rigid structure and standardization of mass schooling wasn't good for young people. "There is a level of emotional damage that that kind of structure has on students," says Bogle. "It doesn't prepare them for the future and actually damages their ability to prepare themselves for the future." Bogle ended up homeschooling his own children with a self-directed approach. He became increasingly interested in alternative education models and teamed up with Prenda to help more students, as well as teachers. "Prenda is creating opportunities for teachers who hate the system they work in to get out and feel good about what they are doing again, to feel good about helping kids," says Bogle.

By opening up the education marketplace and relying less on government provision of education, Arizona is leading the way in creating more and better education opportunities for young people through entrepreneurship and innovation.

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