

Will Supreme Court decision bring more school choice to Maryland

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Whether it comes to where we live, where we work or which house we buy, having choices is very important for our happiness. So is the ability to choose the best education option for our children.

On June 30, the U.S. Supreme Court **ruled** in favor of Montana parents seeking to use state scholarships to send their children to religious schools. The Espinoza v. Montana ruling was a long-awaited victory for school choice supporters across the U.S., and a monumental decision that will hopefully pave the way for expansion of educational freedom in all 50 states.

In Maryland, a state that notoriously lacks diverse schooling options for children, the decision is especially significant.

Although Maryland does offer some charter school options and a private school voucher program, the Cato Institute ranks Maryland's educational freedom **46th** out of 50 states. In total, **less than 3%** of Maryland students enroll in charter schools or take advantage of the voucher program each year.

Maryland's Broadening Options and Opportunity for Students Today (BOOST) program, launched in 2016, provides vouchers to low-income children to attend private schools. Among many problems, the program is limited size and scope. Only children from families who fall below the federal poverty guidelines can qualify, and the program budget is a **line item appropriation** that must be approved by the state legislature each year. The program is also known for **banning** a school from participating due to its religious views about sexuality.

Currently, Maryland is planning a comprehensive overhaul of its education system, often referred to as the Kirwan plan, which would cost the state \$32 billion over the next decade. Unfortunately, the plan **refuses to endorse** any form of school choice expansion in Maryland. It simply recommends more unaccountable and irresponsible spending — the **same mistake** the state made under the Thornton recommendations of the early 2000s.

Fortunately, it is not too late to modify the Kirwan plan to make reform more cost-effective and state schools more competitive.

Along with expanding charter school options in the state, expanding the size and the scope of the BOOST program would be a fiscally responsible move that can transform Maryland children's

future. The program costs the state just over **\$2,000 per pupil**, compared to average cost of **\$14,848 per pupil** for Maryland public schools. Meanwhile, the benefits of sending our children to private schools are **numerous**, as a one-size-fits-all public school education does not accommodate different learning needs and family priorities.

Especially given Maryland's **budget condition** amid the COVID-19 pandemic and recession, the state simply cannot afford to spend money that will not maximize returns. Universal **pre-kindergarten** and higher pay for the teachers and administrators may please the state unions, but parents will not be happy unless their extra investment actually translates into improved learning outcomes in the long run.

Leaving aside the issue of financial returns, more school choice will also trigger more competition among schools, motivating them to innovate and provide the highest-quality services they can in order to survive. Instead, the public school monopoly in many states perpetuates the system of inefficient schools and failing children, as demonstrated by the case of Maryland. Although Maryland educational spending is the **14th highest** in the nation, **less than half** of Maryland children pass the PARCC English and math tests.

In the end, there is no policy less clever than repeating the past while expecting a dramatically different result. Maryland's Thornton experiment has clearly demonstrated that more school spending does not lead to better learning outcomes for children, which is why Maryland should not repeat its course. In light of the Espinoza v. Montana ruling, it is time to shift focus and finally test out what more educational freedom can do for our children.