

School Reform News

CENTER FOR SCHOOL REFORM AT THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE

Empowering parents to improve schools

- [HOME](#)
- [BLOG](#)
- [PUBLICATIONS](#)
- [RESEARCH](#)
- [MULTIMEDIA](#)
- [EXPERTS](#)
- [ABOUT](#)

Report: Government Should Offer Range of School Choices

[School Reform News](#) > [April 2010](#)
[Education](#) > [Charter Schools](#)
[Education](#) > [Distance Learning](#)
[Education](#) > [Federal Government](#)
[Education](#) > [Public School Choice](#)
[Education](#) > [Reform Ideas](#)
[Education](#) > [States](#)
[Education](#) > [Vouchers: Private](#)

Email a Friend

Written By: [Ben Boychuk](#)

Published In: [School Reform News](#) > [April 2010](#)

Publication date: 03/15/2010

Publisher: The Heartland Institute

A new report from a prominent think tank argues against favoring voucher programs and suggests concentrating on other options. The authors of "Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education," from the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy, suggest policymakers focus on open enrollment, "virtual education," and distance learning as politically feasible ways of extending choice to parents and children.

The report's authors take pains to say their conclusions are nonpartisan and "do not represent advocacy for any particular type of education institution or program," arguing, "school choice should be a democratic process that benefits from the informed participation of parents."

"Our position is that whatever the education delivery design the public has chosen to put in place in a particular school jurisdiction, parents should be afforded the maximum degree of choice, provided with valid information on the performance of the education programs that are available, and have their preferences for education programs reflected in the funding of those programs," the study's authors write.

Differences of Opinion

But while school reform advocates praised the report's clear endorsement of choice, there was strong criticism of the report's attempt to push the reform movement away from voucher plans and other such sweeping changes.

"I've argued that the evidence doesn't support the report's recommendations, but it has stimulated a serious debate on the sorts of policies that will advance school choice, and that's a good thing," said Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom in Washington DC.

"The federal government could encourage effective market reforms by ceasing its current efforts to homogenize American education through national standards and testing," Coulson explained. "If the feds get out of the way, it will return the focus of education reformers to the state level, where variations in policies between states will reveal which reforms work and which do not."

"The bad states will ultimately emulate the good, or find themselves hemorrhaging people and businesses," he said.

Advancing Virtual Learning

One of the report's coauthors says policymakers should look closely at the report's recommendations for expanding online education. "The most important part of the report identifies the potential for vastly expanding virtual learning in American schools," said Paul Peterson, director the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University.

Peterson points to Florida's virtual schooling program as a competitive model for other states to emulate. The state lets high school and middle school students take courses for credit online from public or private institutions, and covers the cost of tuition.

"The idea is to create healthy competition between the virtual school and the regular public school," Peterson explained. "We know from Florida that the students taking virtual classes are among the higher-scoring kids. We also know that

SUBSCRIBE

Subscribe Via Email

Your Email Address

[Subscribe via Rss](#)

FEATURED VIDEO

.

John Stossel addresses the District of Columbia's Opportunity Scholarship Program.

OUR FEATURED EXPERT



Ben Boychuk III is the new managing editor of *School Reform News*. He's available for research, writing, and speaking engagements on school reform issues from distance learning to vouchers and everything in between.

[Complete bio](#)
[Articles by Ben Boychuk](#)
[Email Ben Boychuk](#)

ABOUT THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE

The Center for School Reform is a project of The [Heartland Institute](#), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1984. ([Read more](#))

[Contact Us](#)
[Support this Site](#)

MORE FROM THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE



students in online Advanced Placement classes tend to score higher than the students in regular AP courses."

Peterson said that, if nothing else, the Obama administration should do more to advance virtual learning. "It should be in Race to the Top," Peterson said. "It's so much more innovative than many of the ideas they're promoting."

Although virtual learning is still young, Peterson is cautiously optimistic. "My general conclusion is that online learning doesn't appear to be worse," than traditional classroom learning he said.

'Fresh Ideas'

Other reform advocates see merit in the idea as well.

"We are at a very early phase when considering virtual schools and online learning," said Paul DiPerna, research director at the Foundation for Educational Choice in Indianapolis. "The potential for fiscal relief to local and state government is enormous, especially if private providers of online learning are allowed to grow and expand."

"In a fairly benign way, the feds can provide incentives and funding opportunities to foster virtual school sector development, both for public and private providers," DiPerna added.

DiPerna said he hopes the report "will prompt public officials to ask fundamental questions about how we structure our way of schooling children." He called the report's recommendations for developing an education competition index, "school navigator" websites, and parental information supports "fresh ideas for choice policy design."

Report Pitched to Obama

Jay P. Greene, a University of Arkansas professor of education and one of the report's coauthors, responded to Coulson's critique on his weblog.

"We self-consciously viewed our task in writing the report as trying to present policy options on school choice that would be viable in the current political climate and potentially attractive to the Obama administration," Greene wrote.

"Incrementalism is our only feasible strategy for getting the kind of choice and competition we really need," Greene wrote. "While we must always be vigilant about the dangers of certain compromises, I think we have no choice but to try to build on incremental reforms."

Calling for Flexibility

DiPerna says whatever criticisms choice proponents may have, the Brookings report is important in stressing maximum flexibility.

"All jurisdictions, state or local, are at different points on the choice spectrum," DiPerna said. "No matter where your jurisdiction is located on the spectrum, there is room to expand educational options for families. It suggests ideas to expand choice no matter where you live in the country."

"States are really going to have to lead the charge," Greene said in an interview. "But the federal government can assist the states by removing barriers in federal legislation, by improving national credentialing and information systems, and by providing seed money to state and local projects."

The study's other authors are W. Bentley MacLeod of Columbia University, Thomas Nechyba of Duke University, Meredith Rosenthal of Harvard's School of Public Health, and Tom Loveless and Grover Whitehurst, both of the Brookings Institution.

Ben Boychuk (bboychuk@heartland.org) is managing editor of School Reform News.

Internet Info:

"Expanding Choice in Elementary and Secondary Education," Brookings Institution:
http://www.heartland.org/schoolreform-news.org/Article/27152/Expanding_Choice_in_Elementary_and_Secondary_Education.html

See more articles by Ben Boychuk

Post a comment:

Name:

E-Mail:

Email will not be displayed, distributed or sold to third parties

Your Comment:

