

# Educational Choice

*Don Closson surveys the state of educational choice in America. Even though educational spending is the largest category in every state's budget, money is not our primary concern. It is the well being of our children.*

What does the idea of educational choice have to do with a Christian worldview? Quite a lot, actually. As Christians we are called to be concerned about justice, about the poor, about the weakest individuals in our society. We also have an interest in having a population educated well enough to read and understand the Bible. It is about “loving our neighbors as ourselves” and “doing unto the least of these” in the society around us.

I must admit that during my twelve years of teaching and administrating in public schools educational choice wasn't a burning issue. I admit that personal interest convinced me to become a supporter. Vouchers made sense as I experienced the difficulty of paying taxes for local public schools even though my children were being home-schooled or were attending private schools. Back then, supporters of vouchers were either fans of free-market economist Milton Freeman or were philosophically opposed to the “one-best-system” approach of government-provided schooling. They were a small but vocal minority.



Times have changed. Today, supporters of educational choice are often people who are shocked by the failure of our inner city schools to educate children in any meaningful sense of the word. A rising number of urban leaders have concluded that the current model of schooling just hasn't worked for many of our children.

What is meant by the term “educational choice”? One definition

says, "...it means letting every parent send their child to the school of their choice regardless of where they live or income. Parents choose schools based on their child's needs, not their address." [\[1\]](#) The desire for educational choice over the last couple of decades has found expression in the creation of voucher plans, charter schools, private scholarship programs, and personal tax credits or deductions. Since each state is responsible for establishing its own educational policies, there have been multiple variations on each of these categories along with endless court battles to affirm or deny the constitutionality of each plan.

Those who support educational choice begin with the assumption that increased competition is almost always a good thing. Its proponents argue that when schools must compete for students, they generally work harder at providing a better service. They believe in bottom-up reform, letting parents choose what educational methods and content is best for their children rather than a top-down approach that is guided by a centralized government or teachers' union.

In this article we survey the state of educational choice in America. Even though educational spending is the largest category in every state's budget, money is not our primary concern. It is the well being of our children.

## **Publicly Funded Vouchers**

In 1955 economist Milton Friedman argued that America's public school system was not achieving the goals that it was created for. As a government operated monopoly it was failing in its mandate to educate all of our children equally regardless of race or class. In fact, it was a highly segregated system that was failing our most needy students in our inner city schools. His solution was to open up education to market forces by issuing vouchers to parents who could then choose where to spend their education dollars. He wrote, "In the end, the goal

of education is to ensure learning and guarantee a free society and stable democracy. These goals are better met when all parents are free to choose the school that works best for their child."

For decades, Friedman was a lone voice, but in the early 1990's Milwaukee Wisconsin began a voucher program with 337 students who could use their publicly funded vouchers to attend religious or non-religious private schools in the city. This program is now in its 17<sup>th</sup> year and is approaching its legislatively set cap of 15% of the districts students. In the 2007-08 school year over 18,000 students participated, attending 122 different private schools.[\[2\]](#) Voucher programs have been established in Cleveland Ohio, Colorado, Florida and Washington D.C., only to be met with an onslaught of legal challenges.

In 2002 the Supreme Court ruled that voucher programs are not a violation of the religious establishment clause of the First Amendment. Although that issue has been settled, state courts have whittled away or restricted these programs at every turn. Teachers' unions have also spent millions of dollars to fight voucher program legislation and to campaign against them in statewide referendums.

It appears that limited voucher programs aimed at poor inner-city students who are trapped in dysfunctional schools now have the best chance of succeeding. While middle-class evangelicals seemed supportive of vouchers early on, they now perceive them to be a threat to the independence of the many private religious schools that have sprung up in the last 20 years. Most middle class suburbanites already have the power of school choice because of their financial ability to move into districts with better schools.

Tax supported vouchers are still popular among the many free market conservatives who argue that competition in the educational marketplace would be good for children and for the

public schools. They have also garnered grass root support from the African-American and Hispanic communities in the last decade. There are other ways to inject choice into our educational system, but it is clear to many that choice is needed now, especially for our most needy students.

## Why Educational Choice?

Giving inner city parents a choice in where they send their children to school is critical if we hope to solve the crises in our cities' schools. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings puts it this way:

*"Despite our best efforts, there are still vast inequities within our education system. In too many of our cities, the reality faced by minority and low-income kids is shocking. As you've heard, 15% of our high schools produce more than half of our dropouts. Of these dropout factories a majority of the students trapped in them are minorities, and their high school experience looks vastly different from what most kids encounter. They go to schools where trash litters the floors, where graffiti decorates the walls. . . where most freshmen enter unable to read or do math at an eighth grade-level, and where graduation is a 50/50 shot, or worse."*[{3}](#)

Why do many reformers believe that educational choice has the greatest potential to solve our nation's education problems? Referring to legislation passed in 2004 that provided the first federally funded choice scholarships for low income students in Washington D.C., Secretary of Education Rod Paige explained that:

*"Educational choice is important for two reasons. First, it extends civil rights and social justice. Second, it enhances school effectiveness. The introduction of opportunity scholarships in the District comes fifty years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision. It comes 40 years after*

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demanded a full measure of the American promise. Opportunity scholarships help remove the chains of bureaucracy. They free low-income students to obtain a better education in a school of their choosing."*[{4}](#)

Studies have shown how dramatic changes can occur in cities that allow its parents choice. Writing about the longest voucher program in the nation, the *Wall Street Journal* declares:

*"There's no question the program has been a boon to the city's underprivileged. A 2004 study of high school graduation rates by Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute found that students using vouchers to attend Milwaukee's private schools had a graduation rate of 64%, versus 36% for their public school counterparts. Harvard's Caroline Hoxby has shown that Milwaukee public schools have raised their standards in the wake of voucher competition."*[{5}](#)

Educational choice works because it puts power into the hands of the people who care most about our nation's children, their parents. It works because it increases the autonomy of school administrators so that they can provide the kind of education that the public wants. It works because it encourages learning communities of like-minded adults to work together to provide the best learning environment possible.

## **Private Vouchers and Tax Credits**

Although the press has focused on the legal battles surrounding the use of tax-supported educational vouchers to pay tuition at private religious schools, there is another type of voucher program that is helping thousands of children and continues to grow without legal controversy. There are now more than two dozen *private* voucher programs in cities across the United States. Millions of dollars are being raised by private citizens in order to offer vouchers to less fortunate

children so that they can attend better schools.

In that late 1990's, John Walton of Wal-Mart fame, and Theodore Forstmann of Forstmann Little & Company decided to offer 1,000 scholarships to low income students in Washington D.C. With very little publicity they received over 8,000 applications. Sensing a real need, in 1998 they together donated \$100 million towards a national program that would fund 40,000 scholarships inaugurating the Children's Scholarship Fund.[\[6\]](#) That got people's attention. Former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, Martin Luther King III, General Colin Powell, and numerous C.E.O.'s from some of America's best known corporations have served on the organization's board.

By September of 1998 the fund grew to \$170 million. Eventually, the Children's Scholarship Fund received applications from 1.25 million children from 22,000 cities and towns in all fifty states.

Mr. Forstmann concluded that:

*The parents of 1.25 million children put an end to the debate over whether low-income families want choice in education: They passionately, desperately, unequivocally do. Now it is up to the defenders of the status quo to tell them, and the millions they represent, why they cannot have it.*[\[7\]](#)

In 2007, the Children's Scholarship Fund gave vouchers to 29,000 students. The families receiving these scholarships earned an average of around \$27,000 a year, and supplemented the scholarship with an additional \$2,000 per student. These low income families have a strong desire to remove their children from their current schools and are willing to make a significant sacrifice to acquire a good education for their children.

State-sponsored tax credits are another alternative to tax-funded vouchers. They are popular because of they are simple

to administrate; they have a relatively long history and a settled legal status. They have limited scope because not all states have an income tax and often it is the families who need help the most who do not benefit from tax credits because of their low tax liability.

Advocates of educational choice agree that it will take many different tactics to provide the freedom parents need to get the best education possible for their children.

## **Educational Freedom**

In 2001, the Manhattan Institute released an interesting study concerning the idea of educational freedom. The study suggested a strong relationship between the amount of freedom a state gives parents in directing their children to a school of their choice and the level of academic achievement accomplished by those children.

Since education is primarily governed at the state level, it makes sense to measure educational freedom by state. In the study, a state's ranking is determined by how much freedom parents are given by its laws regulating vouchers, charter schools, home-schooling, choice within existing public schools, and tax credits allowed for education expenses.

According to the study, the most educationally free state is Arizona. It gets the top spot because of its wide selection of charter schools and its tax credits for private school expenses. The least educationally free state is Hawaii. Hawaii scores lowest on the index because it has one large school district for the entire state, no charter schools, and it highly regulates home-schoolers. Utah is second to last because gives no assistance to those sending their children to private schools, has few charter schools, and has large centralized school districts.

The study concludes that "For many years education reformers

have advocated strengthening accountability systems and expanding educational freedom. Our statistical models suggest that such reforms, where implemented, have yielded the academic improvements that reformers predicted.”{8} For instance, a one-point increase in a state’s freedom index would predict a 4% increase in that state’s math test results indicated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Educational freedom received another boost in a study released in October 2007 by the Milton & Rose Friedman Foundation. The research concludes that “A large body of top-quality studies consistently shows that school choice produces higher academic achievement for the students who have the opportunity to use it. On this issue, the evidence supporting school choice is as strong as the evidence on any social policy question whatsoever.”{9}

Freedom makes a difference in education. Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute writes, “Simply providing families with additional options in the education of their children has a larger independent effect on student achievement than increasing education spending or reducing class size... the magnitude of the benefit of education freedom for student learning is comparable to the benefit of significantly increasing median household income.”{10}

Christians are called upon to love their neighbors, and their neighbors’ children, as themselves. If we are serious about helping our underprivileged neighbors, especially in our inner-cities schools, educational freedom through greater choice is a policy we can and should endorse.

## Notes

1. [www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/schoolchoice/](http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/schoolchoice/). Accessed on 12/13/2007.
2. [www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/facts/index.cfm?fl\\_id=1](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/facts/index.cfm?fl_id=1). Accessed on 12/17/2007.

3. [www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2007/05/05092007.html](http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2007/05/05092007.html). Accessed on 12/14/2007.
4. [www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/01/01282004.html](http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/01/01282004.html). Accessed on 12/14/2007.
5. This editorial appeared in the January 23, 2006 *Wall Street Journal*.
6. [www.scholarshipfund.org/index.asp](http://www.scholarshipfund.org/index.asp). Accessed on 12/17/2007.
7. Theodore J. Forstmann, "A Competitive Vision for American Education" *Imprimis*, September 1999, Vol. 28, #9, p. 2.
8. [www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_24.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_24.htm). Accessed on 12/20/2007.
9. [www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/downloadFile.do?id=255](http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/downloadFile.do?id=255). Accessed on 12/20/2007.
10. [www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_14.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_14.htm). Accessed on 12/20/2007.

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## Education Myths

*Don Closson offers 5 myths about education commonly held by the American public, from a Christian perspective. These myths include neutrality, more money is the solution, teachers are underpaid and school choice harms public education.*

### The Myth of Neutrality

Most of us assume that those involved with our public schools have at least one thing in common: the belief that the kids come first. This assumption allows us to believe that a kind of neutrality exists among the various participating parties. Since they all have the best interests of our children in mind, we can trust their motives and their actions. It also leads some to believe that there is no place for politics in

schools; again, thanks to the myth of neutrality.

The problem with this kind of thinking is that no such neutrality exists. Our schools are highly political and are a battle ground for the various groups hoping to cash in on the huge amount of money Americans spend on public schools every year. Politics is all about deciding how our tax monies will be distributed, who gets what resources, when, and how. In the 2003-04 school year, America spent over \$500 billion on public schools with about 60 percent of that amount going to actual classroom expenses. But even though we spend more on public education than any other industrialized nation, our schools continue to fail to adequately educate those who are most in need of a good education: our inner city students.

Despite being in an almost constant state of reform, the school districts in our largest cities perform poorly. In New York schools, only 18 percent of children receive a Regents Diploma after four years of high school. Those numbers fall to 10 percent for black and Hispanic students. Yet year after year, regardless of their performance teachers, principals, and central office staff cash their paychecks. Teachers unions, textbook publishers, and even colleges and universities that earn millions training and retraining teachers, thrive on their connection to the annual education budgets of our nation's cities. As New York Post columnist Bob McManus once put it: "This is the New York City public school system, after all, where power comes first and kids come last—but where money matters most of all."[11](#)

The entrenched bureaucracy that has grown up around the education industry knows how to protect itself and its link to the billions of dollars being spent. The lobbying efforts of teachers unions, national organizations representing school board members and superintendents, as well as the textbook companies all fight for influence in Washington and state capitols.

It must be said that there are many teachers, principals, school board members and countless others involved with our schools who are diligently and conscientiously working to educate our nation's children. However, the way that our school systems are organized virtually guarantees that politics will reign supreme when important decisions are made on behalf of our most needy students.

In this article, we take a look at five myths about public education held by the American public.

## **The “If Only We Had More Money” Myth**

Rarely do representatives of our nation's teachers unions, the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers write about deficiencies in our public schools without blaming them on a lack of adequate funding. The “we need more money” mantra has been heard so often that it is ingrained in the minds of most Americans and goes unquestioned by most. But is this always the best explanation for the failure of our schools to educate well? In fact, inadequate funding is only one of many possible reasons for poor performance.

The U.S. has been increasing per pupil spending consistently for the last fifty years. From 1945 to 2001, inflation adjusted spending has grown from \$1,214 per student to \$8,745. Measuring increases in performance over that period is more difficult. We do have good data from the early 1970s when the National Assessment of Educational Progress began. Unfortunately, scores for twelfth grade students have remained essentially flat in reading, math, and science over that time period, and graduation rates have changed little. Many studies have concluded that although we have increased our educational spending significantly there has been little or no significant improvement in our schools.

Various explanations have been given for why more money hasn't resulted in improved student performance. One of the most popular is that much of the increase in funding has gone to services for disabled students and special education programs. The special ed complaint is answered by the fact that we don't have a higher percentage of disabled students; rather, we are choosing to label students disabled who in the past would have been called slow or under-average learners. The percentage of students with severe disabilities has actually remained level between 1976 and 2001, and the number of students classified as mentally retarded has actually declined.[\[2\]](#) Regardless of what label we give these students, increased dollars spent should result in improved performance, but it hasn't.

Some argue that a smaller fraction of every budget dollar actually goes to classroom instruction, but whose fault is that? Others complain that students are harder to teach today due to the effects of poverty, greater healthcare needs, and the fact that they are more likely to speak a foreign language than in the past. However, childhood poverty rates have held fairly steady since the late 70s and has been declining since 1992.[\[3\]](#) One of the best indicators of health care for children, the child mortality rate, has improved 66 percent in the last thirty years, so it is hard to argue that today's children have poorer health care. The only argument that holds up is that more students have a native language other than English. But this factor alone does not explain why the huge increases in spending have not resulted in better performance.

## **Teachers Are Badly Underpaid**

Another myth is that students perform poorly because teachers are severely underpaid.

Every few years we are warned about a looming shortage of teachers or that teachers cannot afford to live in the cities in which they teach, resulting in either inferior teachers or

large classes. For instance, during the internet boom of the 90s, it was feared that teachers could not afford to live in Silicon Valley due to the high cost of real estate. But a number of years later, the San Jose Mercury analyzed housing data from that period and discovered that there was no crisis. In fact, 95 percent of the teachers who taught there lived there, and about two thirds owned their own homes.[\[4\]](#) In fact, teachers fared better than software engineers, network administrators, and accountants when it came to home ownership.[\[5\]](#)

Others argue that the best and the brightest stay away from teaching because salary rates compare poorly to similar professions. But most researchers compare teachers' annual salary with the annual salary of other professions without taking into account the one hundred eighty day work year for the typical teacher. Adjusting the average teacher's annual salary of \$44,600 to a full-time equivalent brings it to \$65,440. This amount represents a respectable middle class salary by anyone's calculation.

Another way to look at the issue is on an hourly basis. In 2002, high school teachers made an average of \$31.01 per hour. This compares to \$30 per hour for chemists, \$29.76 per hour for mechanical engineers, \$28.07 per hour for biologists, and \$24.57 per hour for nurses.[\[6\]](#) Doctors, lawyers, dentists, and others do make more per hour than teachers, but their education is far more rigorous, and they often require long internships or residency obligations.

Even when one compares benefits other than income teachers fare well. One researcher discovered that half of all teachers pay nothing for single-person health care coverage, while the same is true for less than one-quarter of private-sector professionals and technical employees.[\[7\]](#) Another type of employment benefit that teachers enjoy is job security. It becomes remarkably difficult to fire a teacher who has been employed by a school district for three or more years. Tenure

protection for public school teachers give them almost unparalleled job security compared to professionals in the private sector.

The reason that teaching does not attract the best and the brightest is more likely tied to the way that individual teachers salaries are determined than the average amount paid. A recent study found that the inability of teachers to make more money by performing better than their peers is the main cause for the declining academic abilities of those entering the field.<sup>{8}</sup> Talented people want to know that they can earn more if they work harder than others around them.

## **School Choice Harms Public Education**

Another controversy that has generated myths of its own is the debate over educational choice or voucher programs. There are two popular misconceptions: first, that research has been inconclusive regarding the benefits of voucher programs, and second, that educational choice damages public education.

Whenever the topic of school vouchers comes up in major media outlets the consistent message is that research on their benefit to students is mixed at best. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine have all sounded the same warning. *Time* wrote, “Do vouchers help boost the test scores of children who use them? Researchers are trying to find out, but the evidence so far is inconclusive.”<sup>{9}</sup> Why would publications and even researchers equivocate on the benefits of vouchers? There are a number of possible reasons. Ideology can play a role. If one has come out against vouchers it’s difficult to affirm them regardless what the research says. Financial interests might also play a role if supporting vouchers might result in the loss of funding or readership.

The most accurate way to research the impact of voucher programs is to perform random-assignment studies.<sup>{10}</sup> There

have been eight such studies, and all of them found a positive effect or advantage in academic progress for students who received a voucher to attend a private school. Seven of the eight findings were statistically significant. The question left to researchers is to determine the magnitude and scope of the positive effect and to establish the conditions that result in the greatest amount of progress.

The second myth; that voucher programs damage nearby public schools, is also contrary to the evidence. Although not all voucher programs are large enough to impact the public schools nearby, those programs that have the potential to do so have been studied. The consistent finding is that the competition caused by vouchers always results in an increase in public school performance. For instance, as a result of Florida's A-Plus voucher program, "public schools whose students were offered vouchers produced significantly greater year-to-year test score gains than other Florida public schools."[\[11\]](#) Schools that faced competition experienced a 5.9 percentile point advantage on the Stanford-9 math test over schools not facing competition.[\[12\]](#) Other studies showed that even the threat of future competition produced public school improvement.

Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby studied the impact that the oldest voucher program in the country has had on student performance in Milwaukee's public schools. Again, she discovered that "schools exposed to greater voucher competition made significantly larger test score gains than schools less exposed to voucher competition."[\[13\]](#)

Studies in other states have supported the benefit of competition as well. Vouchers offered in Maine, Vermont's "tuitioning" programs, and charter schools in Arizona and Michigan have all prompted better performance in nearby public schools.

# Public Education Doesn't Matter

Our final American education myth is often held by conservative Christians. It is the belief that public education doesn't matter. The argument goes something like this: the public educational establishment has adopted a completely naturalistic worldview. And, as a result, it is hostile towards anything Christian, rendering it morally bankrupt.

While it is true that our public education system is primarily built upon the assumptions of naturalism, and that it is often hostile to both individual Christians and Christian thought. It does not follow that Christians, even those who chose to home school or place their children in a private Christian school, should be indifferent to the fate of children in our public schools.

Perhaps we can compare our situation to that of the Israelites while in captivity in Babylon. Although the culture was alien and often hostile, as ours can be today, and it would have been tempting to undermine its institutions and seek its destruction, God communicated via the prophet Jeremiah that the Jews were to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."[\[14\]](#)

Out of love for our neighbors and their children, we should desire to see them receive the best education possible. One of the earliest justifications for public education was that children needed to become literate in order to understand the Bible and apply it to their lives. In 1647, Massachusetts passed the Old Deluder Act which argued that public education was necessary because Satan attempted to keep men in ignorance of the Scriptures by keeping them from the true sense and meaning of the text. If they could read it for themselves they would be less susceptible to deception. The same need is present today. A literate society is not necessarily more open

to the Bible and its message, but illiteracy places a large gulf between an interested individual and God's revelation.

Another reason to not lose interest in the funding and functioning of our public schools is because we continue to pay for them. If we are to be good stewards of the monies granted us by God, we cannot ignore perhaps the largest single government expense. The amount of money spent on public education in America is massive by any standard, and the potential for abuse and misuse is equally large.

Into the near future, most American children, Christian and otherwise, will be educated in our public schools. Misinformation or political spin should not be allowed to shape our opinions or our decisions about education in the voting booth. The parties involved are not neutral. Although many have the best interests of the children at heart, power and money also play a major role in educational policy making.

## Notes

1. Joe Williams, *Cheating Our Kids* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 7.
2. Jay P. Green, *Education Myths* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 24.
3. Ibid., 26.
4. Ibid., 72.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 79.
7. Ibid., 82.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Ibid., 147.
10. See chapter 13 of *Education Myths* for an explanation.
11. *Education Myths*, 170.
12. Ibid., 172.
13. Ibid., 173.
14. Jeremiah 29:7

