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 17th 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/. Accessed on 12/13/2007.
2. www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/facts/index.cfm?fl_id=1. Accessed on 12/17/2007.

3. www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2007/05/05092007.html. Accessed on 12/14/2007.
4. 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. 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. Accessed on 12/20/2007.
9. www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/downloadFile.do?id=255. Accessed on 12/20/2007.
10. www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_14.htm. Accessed on 12/20/2007.

© 2008 Probe Ministries