



Talking Points *For Community Leaders*

School Choice Public Benefit or Private Promotion?

There is little doubt that advocates for a wide range of “school choice” programs and the privatization of education hope to make great strides this year. The U.S. Secretary of Education appointed by President Trump, Betsy DeVos, is primarily known for her advocacy of school choice, school voucher programs and charter schools. Unfortunately, her involvement and experience with traditional public schools is remarkably limited.

It is important that all stakeholders have knowledge about the issues and consequences associated with school choice, beginning with a shared definition of school choice.

Definition

School choice is a term for K–12 public education options. It includes a wide array of programs offering students and their families alternatives to the publicly-provided schools to which students are generally assigned by the location of their family residence.

Constitutional Foundation for Public Schools

The Minnesota State Constitution articulates: “The stability of a republican form of government depends mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools. The legislature shall make such provisions by taxation or otherwise as will secure a thorough and efficient system of public schools throughout the state.”

Data

Minnesota Schools

- K-12 public school enrollment in Minnesota was 842,932 in 2014-2015.
- Less than 10% of Minnesota students attend nonpublic schools, including private schools that are both parochial and nonsectarian, and homeschools.
- Pre-kindergarten and early childhood enrollment in Minnesota public schools was 14,977 in 2015.
- There were an estimated 165 charter schools in Minnesota in the 2015-2016 school year with an enrollment of approximately 48,200 students. Although they are publicly funded, charter schools are exempt from many of the requirements imposed by state and local boards of education regarding hiring and curriculum (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools).
- There were 85,260 students enrolled in 500 private schools in 2013.
- 40,952 students attended Minnesota’s 78 public magnet schools, 63% of whom were racial/ethnic minorities in 2014-2015.
- 68,213 K-12 students were enrolled in non-public schools in Minnesota in 2014-2015.

Options

Students in Minnesota have school choice options by law. These options include open enrollment, charter schools, and approved public online schools. Many public school districts also offer unique program options such as magnets, gifted and talented, targeted services, alternative learning, English Learner (EL), special education, and online or blended learning.

Some other states provide financial assistance to parents who pursue private school options. This assistance may take the form of school vouchers, which support public school students attending private schools; scholarship tax credits; personal tax credits and deductions; and education savings accounts (ESAs), which allow parents to receive public funds directly for educational expenses (Ballotpedia—*Public Policy in Minnesota*).

Perspective

Critics contend that the range of school choice programs diverts funds from traditional public schools, thereby generating unequal outcomes for students despite a blatant lack of evidence that choice is academically beneficial when comparing students from similar circumstances. In addition, critics argue that school voucher programs wrongly direct tax dollars to religious organizations, which operate many private schools.

Currently, according to EdChoice (formerly the Friedman Foundation), 17 states provide some form of tax-credit scholarships for students. In Florida, for example, corporations can donate money to “tax-credit scholarships” in lieu of paying taxes for the amount donated. In that case, the money does not go through the government and therefore is not subject to church/state restrictions. The Florida model diverts what would be public dollars to private organizations.

One likely point of conflict is President Trump’s pledge to earmark \$20 billion for school choice programs such as vouchers, which could be used to pay tuition at private schools. But where that \$20 billion would come from and how it might affect other funds administered by the U.S. Department of Education is troubling to some administrators, even though the bulk of school funding comes from the state (San Diego Union Tribune, March 22, 2017).

“The concept of taking money away from public schools that offer a variety of choices to students, and putting it into private schools, would be very destabilizing to the strong education system we have here.” – Efrain Barerra, Community Assets Management, San Francisco Bay Area

It is important that stakeholders are informed about the consequences of privatization initiatives, as well as the progress of and choices within public schools. Promotional resources supporting a variety of choice initiatives, public and private, are enormous. Only accurate information and comparisons of school choices can balance the scales of public perception and political support. Your local school district administrators can provide you with specific and accurate information about the choices offered within the public-school system and how public resources can be most effectively utilized to support student achievement and social outcomes.

“There is a great deal of money flowing freely from billionaires like the Walton family (Walmart), Michael Bloomberg, Bill Gates, Eli Broad, John Arnold and many more to promote privatization.” – Diane Silvers Ravitch, educational policy analyst who served under Presidents George H. W. Bush and President Bill Clinton.

Important Information

- Any perceived academic advantages of private schools disappear and even reverse in most cases after controlling for demographics (Sarah Theule Lubienski and Christopher Lubienski, *Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data*, University of Illinois, January 2006).
- The costs of an overall voucher infrastructure appear to exceed those of the present system (Henry M. Levin, *Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice and Costs*, 1998).
- Evidence suggests that the costs of private schools are not lower than those of public schools (Levin).
- A report comparing 2003 NAEP achievement levels in public schools and charter schools concluded that students in traditional public schools outscore their peers in charter schools.

When choosing a school to support or for your children to attend – public or private – there are specific characteristics to seek. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, high-performing schools have the following in common:

1. They have a clear and shared focus on teaching and learning.
2. They have high standards and expectations for all students.
3. They have effective school leadership.
4. There are high levels of collaboration and communication.
5. Curriculum, instruction and assessments are aligned with standards set by the state for public schools or by state-recognized accrediting agencies for nonpublic schools.
6. There is frequent monitoring of teaching and learning.
7. There is ongoing and focused professional development.
8. There is a supportive learning environment for students.
9. There are high levels of family and community engagement.



These materials are provided by
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