



The Vermont Legislative Research Shop

School Choice

An Overview of the Issues

Since the 1980's school choice, which allows parents increased freedom to choose which schools their children attend, has become an increasingly popular but also contentious issue of educational reform. School choice has inspired intense argument from parents, educators and politicians on either end of the political spectrum. The debate, however, is far from a black and white matter and involves theoretical issues, legal challenges, pragmatic concerns for educational output and complex issues that vary with the form and type of choices.

The rationale behind school choice is that the public, governmental control of education has provided unsatisfactory results and has given parents insufficient control of their children's education. School choice is based on a private-market model, which assumes that free educational markets based on competition would lead to both increased freedom for parents and better results from our schools. In this model privatization and competition will stimulate improvement and control costs of education as schools vie for students and the resources that follow them. In theory, standards would be raised as schools were forced to prove their competence and superiority. Those schools that cannot keep up and attract students will be forced to either improve or close down, while schools that perform well will be rewarded by increased enrollment. Proponents claim that the unnecessary bureaucratic control, that diminishes public school efficiency, would be cut down with school choice.

Much of the reasoning underlying school choice is the claim that allowing parents to choose schools that affirm their private values, beliefs or religion, would promote diversity. School choice proponents claim that requiring children to attend public schools does not adequately support the multiplicity and the strength of moral and religious beliefs of America parents. Thus, parents should be able to affirm their values and religion through their choice of schools. Privatization, it is claimed, would give parents greater freedom in shaping the private beliefs and character of their children. Proponents claim that this freedom is especially important for religiously diverse parents who do not have the same religious beliefs as the majority of the population.

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A major source of opposition is the belief that school choice will lead to increased social, racial and economic stratification. This argument maintains that students who are either self-motivated, or who have ambitious parents with the time and commitment to researching and pursuing choices, will be more prone to use the vouchers. As these students move to private, parochial or charter schools, they will take with them funds that might have otherwise gone towards resources and support of public schools. The argument is that the students left behind in the public schools will suffer greatly. Opponents claim that these will be the students whose parents are typically not able or willing to be active in their children's education- - the very students in need of the most help and the most resources, such as minorities and those living in poverty.

Opponents also assert that the regulations in place to assure the accountability of private, parochial or charter schools, are insufficient. For example, opponents of school choice often allege that choice programs do not adequately ensure that choice schools do not adopt discriminatory acceptance practices. The argument is that because private schools are unaccountable to the public the use of public funds to support is unwise.

Those that dispute the efficacy of school choice advise greater support and innovation in the improvement of our current, public education system.

The school choice debate is often presented as a yes/no question, in which choice either exists or does not exist. In reality, however, school choice exists on a continuum, and the programs being proposed vary between employment of complete privatization to minor choice options. Depending on the form and structure of the school choice program, parents will be given varying degrees of autonomy in choosing their children's education. Because of the wide array of choice options, it is difficult to make generalizations about the efficacy of programs in various situations. The following maps show the programs that have been implemented by the states demonstrate the variability of choice programs.





program specifically excluded religious schools. The Court did not address if the program jeopardized parents' First Amendment right to free exercise of religion and therefore, the United States Supreme Court declined to review the case.

In *Bush v. Holmes*, Florida's First District Appellate Court ruled that the Opportunity Scholarship Program which authorized the State to pay tuition for students to attend private schools did not violate the Florida Constitution. The circuit court which had ruled against the program had argued that Article IX of the Florida Constitution forbid the State from providing education outside "the system of free public schools." The Appellate Court disagreed and ruled that Article IX did not prohibit using state funds to subsidize private school education, when necessary. The Court argued that in fact, Article IX requires that students receive a "high quality education" and the program facilitates that goal by moving students

Family Income: There have been studies that have been done in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and New York City. The findings have shown that the voucher programs are targeted at low-income families. The study done in Milwaukee found that the mean income for voucher recipients was \$11,300, while the regular Milwaukee mean family income was \$22,000. In Cleveland the average family income for voucher recipients was \$15,800 and the average income for other families was \$20,000. New York City had a lottery system for the voucher recipients, in order to qualify for the voucher lottery the children had to qualify for the federal free lunch program. The average family income for New York City was \$9,600. 72% of these families reported receiving welfare or social security.

Parental Satisfaction: Studies done on parental satisfaction have shown that the parents of children that received vouchers have been very satisfied. Reasons for this may be that parents were dissatisfied with their formal schools so much that any change would be better.

Parental Education: Parental education of mothers of voucher students tends to be higher than mothers of public school children, most of the time. The study done in Milwaukee showed that 56% of the mothers reported some college education, while only 40% of public school mothers reported some college education. In Cleveland 51% of the mothers of voucher receiving students reported having some college education. 30% mothers with children in public schools reported some college education. The education level in New York City was much more drastic. 54% of the lottery mothers reported having some college education while only 19% of the mothers of low-income families reported some college education.

Parental Marital Status and Family Size: Studies from all three of the cities examined found that voucher students were more likely than public school students to live in single-parent families. In Milwaukee and Cleveland it was found that the mean number of children in voucher households was slightly lower than those in public school households, but there was no information on numbers of children in the New York study.

Race and Ethnicity: The research into the race and ethnicity of the students who used vouchers in the three cities found that certain racial and ethnic backgrounds were represented at greater percentages than their numbers in the school population would predict. In Milwaukee, between 1990 and 1994, 73% of voucher students were African American.

