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School Choice is the Moral Policy

Each legislative session, government school financing is one of the most controversial issues on the agenda. And each legislative session, nearly every party involved—legislators, parents, teachers, and taxpayers—walks away unhappy. The controversy and dissatisfaction will continue unabated until fundamental reform of the educational system is enacted.

About 90 percent of all children in Texas attend government schools. The remaining 10 percent either attend a private school or are home schooled. Yet, surveys regularly find that the majority of parents would prefer a private school or home schooling for their children's education.¹ Why is there such a gap between what parents prefer and what actually occurs?

The answer, at least in part, is how the educational system is funded.

Government schools in Texas are funded primarily through property taxes. This means that the majority of parents are forced to finance an educational system that they really don't want to use. But few parents can afford to pay double—once for government schools and once for private or home schooling. And so, they send their children to government schools.

Because they are forced to pay for government schools, regardless of their own desires or preferences, parents are denied the opportunity to choose their children's education. They are essentially locked into a system that they don't like, but they can't afford an alternative.

I imagine what your life would be like if all choices were removed. Imagine if you couldn't choose what kind of vehicle to drive, which restaurants to eat at, where to buy groceries, or what type of cell phone you could have. Imagine if your taxes would provide you with a Ford for "free," and if you wanted to drive a different brand you would have to pay for it out of your pocket. Most people would be driving Fords. This is the status of our educational system—most parents have no viable choices. And they lack those choices because their property—their money—is taken to finance a service that they don't really want or prefer

The starting point for fundamental reform is introducing choice for parents and students.

While there are a number of ways to give parents more educational choices for their children, perhaps the easiest is a voucher program. Texas spends a little less than \$10,000 per year for each government school student. The average tuition for private schools in Texas is about \$6,800 for elementary schools and \$10,500 for high schools.² Not only would vouchers give parents more choices, but the money spent on education would likely be reduced.

Opponents of vouchers (or any type of choice for parents) argue that government schools will suffer if parents are allowed to choose, because parents will use their vouchers for private schools. Such an argument acknowledges that, given a choice, parents would enroll their children in private schools rather than government schools. And so, the opponents of vouchers want to deny parents

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that choice.

If government schools are providing a quality education, then they should have no concerns about losing students. Parents would continue to send their children to those schools. But government school officials know that their product is deficient. If they had to compete with private schools or home schooling on equal footing, government schools would lose. And so, they lobby against any measure that might introduce even a modicum of competition into the educational system.

Interestingly, the most vocal opponents of school choice are “progressives,” who simultaneously support a woman’s right to choose an abortion (often at taxpayer expense) while denying a similar freedom to parents. They defend the right of women to choose, and decry the right of parents to choose. They only want to allow choices that they approve of.

Giving parents the freedom to choose involves more than just allowing them to select which school their children attend. It also involves allowing them to choose what their children learn.

The curriculum in government schools is largely determined by educational bureaucrats. Individual schools and teachers have little voice in what is taught, and parents even less so. In part, this explains the growth of private schools and home schooling—parents object to what is taught in government schools. Those who can afford it are eager to find a curriculum that is more in line with their values.

Texans have an abundance of choices when it comes to how we spend our entertainment dollars. We can attend sporting events, to go movies, visit museums, attend the symphony or ballet, and much more. Each of us is free to select the entertainment “curriculum” that we want and need. And the market provides us with choices for nearly every taste and inclination.

But when it comes to education, parents don’t have such choices. They can’t select the school that their child will attend or the curriculum that she will be taught. They can’t make a choice based on their desires and their child’s interests. When it comes to education, parents are offered vanilla, and there is a world of other flavors to explore, enjoy, and savor.

A child’s education is one of a parent’s most important responsibilities. But a parent cannot fulfill that responsibility when the freedom to choose is prohibited. It is immoral to deprive parents of that freedom, and it is an injustice to force them to finance a system that they do not approve of or want.

If we truly want to improve the educational system in Texas, we must empower those most affected by that system—parents and students. We must give them the power to choose.

1. For example, see “Survey Reveals Publics Preference for Private Schools,” Council for American Private Education, September 2015, <http://www.capenet.org/pdf/Outlook407.pdf>, accessed November 16, 2017.

2. “Texas Private Schools,” Private School Review, <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/texas>, accessed November 16, 2017.



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