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A Framework for Education Policy

Imagine for a moment the reaction if the State of Texas decided to operate government grocery stores. What if the state determined what products would be on the shelves and socialized the cost of groceries purchased at those stores by imposing a tax on property owners?

Competitors would lose business because of the subsidies for shopping at government grocery stores. Texans who prefer a different grocery store would pay more than those shopping at the official state grocer. Adding insult to injury, those who shop at HEB, Kroger, Whole Foods, or some alternative would be paying, not only for their own groceries, but also part of the cost of the food purchased by others.

This might seem like a farfetched idea, but it is precisely what the state does in regard to education. The Texas Education Agency determines what textbooks are on the shelves and what courses are taught in government schools. The cost of these schools is socialized through taxes, including property taxes. Parents who desire a private school or home schooling for their children are forced to pay twice—once through their taxes and then again through the tuition or other costs for the alternative education.

If the state took the actions mentioned above, many families would begin shopping at government grocery stores simply because they could not afford an alternative. The state **has** taken these actions regarding education, and many, perhaps most, families have little choice but to send their children to government schools because they cannot afford an alternative.

While some Texans may welcome government grocery stores, many would not. They would prefer to have alternatives. They would prefer to buy their groceries at a store that offers the products that best serve their needs, desires, and budget. Similarly, while some parents welcome government schools, many do not. They would prefer alternatives. They would prefer to be able to send their children to a school that best meets the family's needs, desires, and budget.

Every Texan wants children to receive a good education. However, there is disagreement on the best policies for achieving this goal. Some think that allowing parents more choices through vouchers or education savings plans (school choice) is the solution. Others argue that we need to increase funding for government schools.

School choice is a controversial issue across the nation, and it will likely be at the forefront of the 2023 legislative session in Texas. If we want to make the best decisions regarding education policy, then we must employ the proper framework.

A framework acts as both a filter and a lens. As a filter, a framework determines which facts and related issues we will consider; it sifts out that which we consider irrelevant or unimportant. As a lens, a framework determines how we view those facts and issues; it shapes our perspective and

focus. Our framework determines what we will consider and how we will evaluate it. The proper framework will help us make good decisions to achieve our goals. An improper framework will seldom lead to the desired results. Indeed, an improper framework will often lead to policies that make a problem worse.

A proper framework will add clarity to our thinking. It will guide us to clearly define our terms to remove ambiguity and reduce misunderstanding. An improper framework often employs vagueness and imprecision. A proper framework will help us see the big picture—the full context. It will open our eyes to related issues and the interrelationships between them. An improper framework will look at an issue in isolation, refusing to consider how a policy in one area will affect other issues.

Let us begin by looking at and defining two of the terms that dominate the debate over school choice.

Defining Our Terms

If we want to make the best possible decisions, then we must be clear about the meaning of the terms we use. One of the most significant of these terms is “public schools.”

In truth, public schools are government schools. Financing for those schools is obtained through taxes imposed by government bodies. More significantly, government officials determine the curriculum that is taught in government schools. Both the state board of education and the local boards are elected positions, and political ideology plays a significant role in who is elected and the curriculum that they impose on students. Often, that curriculum is contrary to what parents want their children to be taught, and this is one of the primary reasons many parents want alternatives.

Certainly, parents can lobby school boards to adopt a curriculum more consistent with the values they want taught to their children. But at the end of the day, it is the school board that decides, not the parents. Unlike grocery stores, parents are forced to accept whatever decisions the board makes, and most have few alternatives from which to choose if they don’t like the board’s decisions.

The second term requiring a clear understanding is “public money.”¹ Defenders of government schools argue that public money should not be used to subsidize private and religious schools. For example, Rep. Gary VanDeaver told *The Texas Tribune* that he “has been informed that the religious private schools in his area are uninterested in public money.” The Texas Association of School Boards, has criticized vouchers because “they give public money to private entities.”²

In truth, there is no such thing as public money. Tax dollars, which the term refers to, is private money that is taken by government for programs it deems desirable. Public money actually means private money that has been taken from private individuals and businesses. Further, government officials, not parents, decide how that money is spent.

The term “public money” implies that private money belongs to “the public”—government—which may take as much as it wants for purposes that it chooses. Private individuals

1. Brian Lopez, “Texas Republicans are trying to sell school choice measures, but rural conservatives aren’t buying,” *The Texas Tribune*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/08/08/texas-school-choice-legislation/>.

2. “What Texas Public School Advocates Need to Know Before the Next Legislative Session,” <https://www.tasb.org/members/advocate-district/2023-lege-preview/>

should be happy with whatever “the public” allows them to keep. This premise fuels the demands to increase funding for government schools.

Justin Louis Pitcock, the Texas State Chair of Principles First, argues that school choice would “defund public education and subsidize private schools with public money.”³ This claim ignores the fact that individual taxpayers—including non-parents—have been subsidizing government schools for decades. Pitcock goes on to write that “we all know what happens when the government subsidizes something—the public good worsens, and the private good gets too expensive for the people government was trying to help in the first place.” This is precisely what has happened by subsidizing education.

Underlying these terms, and indeed the very idea of government schools, is the premise that everyone is better off if government is in control of education. Somehow, we will all benefit if we are forced to pay for the education of children who are not our own. Somehow, the “public interest” will be served when individuals are required to put aside their self-interest. This makes the needs, desires, and interests of individuals—parents and students—subordinate to the group, i.e., the “the public.” This is the essence of collectivism—the individual must sacrifice his individual interests to “the public interest.” Those who do not do so voluntarily may properly be forced to do so.

Government schools are founded on coercion. Individual taxpayers are forced to finance those schools, regardless of an individual’s own needs, desires, and interests. Curriculums and standards are forced upon parents and students, regardless of their own needs, desires, and interests. Unfortunately, because taxation and other barriers make private school and home schooling unaffordable for most families, nearly 90 percent of America’s children attend government schools. Most families simply cannot afford alternatives to the government schools.

Vouchers and education savings plans remove some of the coercion and give parents and students more options. Such programs help families choose what is best for their children, rather than leaving those decisions in the hands of politicians and bureaucrats. As Isabel Paterson pointedly asked government school supporters in *The God of the Machine*: “Do you think nobody would *willingly* entrust his children to you to pay you for teaching them? Why do you have to extort your fees and collect your pupils by compulsion?”⁴ The defenders of government schools want to continue to use compulsion to support those schools.

There are three primary arguments used to defend government schools:

1. Government schools create a sense of community.
2. Private schools can pick and choose their students.
3. Private schools aren’t accountable.

Let us examine each in turn.

Government Schools Create a Sense of Community

Many defenders of government schools argue that those institutions create a sense of community, particularly in rural areas of the state. Vouchers would reduce the funds available for government

3. Justin Louis Pitcock, “Should a principled Texas conservative vote for Dan Patrick?” *The Houston Chronicle*, October 2, 2022, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/Opinion-Should-a-principled-Texas-conservative-17479015.php>

4. Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), p. 261.

schools, and presumably be harmful to the community. Indeed, Rep. Gary VanDeaver has said, “This sense of community is what makes Texas great, and I would hate to see anything like a voucher program destroy this community spirit.”⁵ Writer Jay Leeson argues that government schools are “the lifeblood of community” and “the pillars of community within those schools.”⁶

It may be true that government schools are the lifeblood of rural communities, but that is not an argument against school choice. The rural opponents of school choice believe that it will be harmful to their community, and so they seek to prevent other parents—including those in urban and suburban communities—from having more control over their children’s education.

This position is founded on the premise that the interests of communities—the group—supersedes the interests of individuals. Individuals should not be given a choice regarding schools because it would harm a particular group.

Some opponents of school choice acknowledge the collectivist premises underlying government schools. For example, Robert Pondiscio and Eli Lucas, two intellectuals at the American Enterprise Institute, write, “We socialize the cost of public education in America because we recognize a shared stake in the preparation for adult life and active citizenship of all children, not just our own.”⁷ They fail to explain why those who do not “recognize a shared stake” should be forced to help pay for government schools.

This defense of government schools is founded on the idea that a democratic majority should be able to impose its desires on everyone else. For example, if a majority doesn’t want school choice, then it should be denied to all, including those who want educational alternatives for their children. In fighting against school choice on the state level, opponents are seeking to deny educational alternatives to all parents and students, including those in urban and suburban communities. Their argument presents us with two contradictory claims.

First, they imply that a large number of parents will take their children out of government schools if they have a viable choice. This will result in a significant reduction in funding for government schools. Second, they claim that most parents are happy with government schools, which implies that only a few will change schools. If this is the case, then funding for the government schools will be minimally impacted.

If a significant number of students change schools, then that would indicate that their parents are unhappy with the government schools. If a significant number of parents are happy with government schools, then the impact will not be the catastrophe many predict.

No matter how many parents select an alternative for their children’s education, there is no rational reason why government schools cannot adjust their budget accordingly. When a private enterprise experiences a reduction in revenues, it usually reduces its spending. Government schools

5. Lopez.

6. Jay Leeson, “The political math of school choice in rural Texas,” *The Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/05/22/the-political-math-of-school-choice-in-rural-texas/?outputType=amp>

7. Robert Pondiscio and Eli Lucas, “Is school choice good for America?” *The Washington Examiner*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/community-family/is-school-choice-good-for-america>

can, and should, do the same. If the schools are serving fewer students, fewer employees and other resources are needed.

Many rural opponents of school choice argue that there are few private alternatives in their communities. If this is true, then it is very unlikely that many parents will want to endure the hardships of long commutes to take their children to distant schools. In that case, the impact on government schools will again be minimal. However, if a significant number of parents are willing to endure those hardships, then that would be additional evidence of their dissatisfaction with government schools.

Interestingly, Reason.com reports that, in Florida, school choice hasn't destroyed rural communities. The article cites a study titled "Rerouting the Myths of Rural Education Choice" that concludes that school choice is not a threat to government schools. In Florida, 83.3 percent of rural students attended government schools in 2021, down from 89.4 percent ten years earlier.⁸ This is certainly a decline, but it isn't a catastrophe.

In addition, the study found that from 2001 to 2021 the number of private schools in rural Florida nearly doubled. It shouldn't be surprising that the supply of education alternatives expanded to meet the growing demand. But that demand can only come into existence if parents can afford alternatives to government schools.

When producers are free, they increase the supply of a value when the market demands it. That is what happened in Florida, and it will happen in Texas. Admittedly, private education alternatives won't sprout from the ground like oil derricks at Spindletop, but they will pop up when and where there is a demand.

The defenders of government schools want to prevent that demand from ever becoming a reality. They want to make it virtually impossible for most Texas families to even consider an alternative to government schools. They want a vote of the majority to limit the choices available to all students and parents in the state.

In contrast, school choice enables each parent to vote as he deems best for his children. By putting his children in a school of his choosing, the parent is voting with his wallet. However, unlike a democratic vote, he can't impose his decision upon anyone else. School choice gives each parent more freedom to choose the school that he thinks will best serve his children's needs, desires, and interests. The opponents of school choice want to prevent parents from using vouchers to find alternatives; the opponents want their choices to be imposed on everyone else.

Some opponents of school choice argue that private schools are not required to accept all applicants. Many students, particularly children from poor families and those with special educational needs, will fall through the cracks and be denied quality education opportunities.

Private Schools don't have to Accept Every Applicant

If we want every child in Texas to have the best education opportunities possible, then the claim that private schools won't meet the needs of poor children and children with special needs deserves serious consideration. This is a legitimate concern, but to properly evaluate it, we must consider the full context.

8. J. D. Tuccille, "Rural Public School Systems Aren't Threatened by Choices, Study Says," Reason.com, December 9, 2022, <https://reason.com/2022/12/09/rural-public-school-systems-arent-threatened-by-choices-study-says/>

Government schools are required to provide education for all children, while private schools have no such requirement. If parents are allowed to withdraw their children from government schools—and with it funding—the argument goes, there will be insufficient funds to educate the poor and special needs children.

This argument holds that we should deny all parents choices regarding schooling so that we can provide education to the poor and special needs children. As we saw with the previous argument against school choice, the underlying premise is that some should be forced to sacrifice for others. Parents and students should sacrifice their needs, desires, and interests for the poor and those with special needs. The needs, desires, and interests of some—non-poor children and children without special needs—are subordinated to the needs, desires, and interests of others.

One reason that many families cannot afford a private school is because they are already paying taxes to finance government schools. If they were able to retain that money, they would have additional funds for tuition at private schools. Of course, that isn't going to happen anytime soon, but it is a fact that we must keep in mind. Vouchers and similar programs are a partial reimbursement for the taxes that parents pay for government schools.

More importantly, there are many alternatives that can help poor families and those with special needs children. Scholarships are the best known, though they more frequently used for college tuition. There is no reason to believe that the individuals, businesses, trade association, and philanthropic organizations won't create scholarship programs for elementary and high school students, make donations to private schools, or otherwise provide assistance. Examples abound.

As one example, in 2009 Oprah Winfrey donated \$1.5 million to the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta. The year before she donated \$365,000 to the school, and in 2017 she gave \$5 million. The school serves poor, inner-city children. Winfrey also established the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. The academy's mission is to “provide a nurturing educational environment for academically gifted girls who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.”⁹

In colonial America education was a favorite form of philanthropy for Quakers, and “the poor, both Quaker and non-Quaker, were allowed to attend without paying fees.”¹⁰ Prior to the Civil War, government schools were virtually non-existent. As educator Robert Peterson writes, most young children were taught at home: “Home education was so common in America that most children knew how to read before they entered school.”¹¹ Compare that to the literacy rate achieved by our government schools. It wasn't necessary for public officials to dictate the curriculum, compel school attendance, or force citizens to pay for government schools. Parents recognized their responsibility for educating their children and acted accordingly. For those who desired additional education, private schoolmasters offered an abundance of choices. Peterson writes:

Historical records, which are by no means complete, reveal that over one hundred and twenty-five private schoolmasters advertised their services in Philadelphia newspapers between 1740 and 1776. Instruction was offered in Latin, Greek, mathematics, surveying, navigation, accounting, bookkeeping, science, English, and contemporary foreign languages. Incompetent and inefficient teachers were soon eliminated, since they were not subsidized by the State or protected by a guild

9. “Mission,” Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, <https://www.owlag.co.za/about-owlag/mission-values/>.

10. Robert A Peterson, “Education in Colonial America”, *The Freeman* 33, no. 9 (September 1983).

11. *Ibid.*

or union. Teachers who satisfied their customers by providing good services prospered. One schoolmaster, Andrew Porter, a mathematics teacher, had over one hundred students enrolled in 1776. The fees the students paid enabled him to provide for a family of seven.¹²

These schools allowed colonial Americans to receive the education they desired without government intervention. The pursuit of profit motivated educators to provide the types of classes and the content that their customers wanted, not that demanded by public officials or pressure groups. The freedom of students permitted them to choose the schools that offered the courses they wanted, not those dictated by politicians and bureaucrats.

Even the poor, blacks, women, and immigrants had an abundance of educational opportunities. Peterson writes: “In 1767, there were at least sixteen evening schools, catering mostly to the needs of Philadelphia’s hard-working German population.... There were also schools for women, blacks, and the poor. Anthony Benezet, a leader in colonial educational thought, pioneered in the education for women and Negroes.”¹³ In short, if an individual—any individual—in colonial America desired an education, he or she had many options from which to choose.

James Tooley, a professor of education policy at the University of Newcastle in England, provides an even more compelling example of education for the poor. Tooley conducted a two-year study of education among the poor in Nigeria, Kenya, China, Ghana, and India. His study focused on differences between government schools and private schools in the poorest areas of his selected cities—areas that lacked indoor plumbing, running water, electricity, and paved roads. What he found was remarkable.

For example, in Hyderabad, India, 76 percent of all school children attend private schools. Despite the fact that government schools are available, most of the city’s poorest parents choose to send their children to private schools, even when they have to pay tuition. Even by Indian standards, the students come from poor households: The students in private schools in Hyderabad had a monthly income of less than \$30 per working household member; this is one-third the average income of \$46 per month in Hyderabad at the time. Tooley reported similar findings in the other cities and concluded: “[T]he poor have found remarkably innovative ways of helping themselves, educationally, and in some of the most destitute places on Earth have managed to nurture a large and growing industry of private schools for themselves.”¹⁴ Tooley’s findings dispel the myth that the poor require paternalistic government assistance in order to educate their children.

These examples show what is possible with a little ingenuity and freedom. Even if private schools were able to meet the educational needs of all students, many argue that those institutions are not accountable.

Private Schools aren’t Accountable

Opponents of school choice argue that private schools aren’t accountable. Bill Tarleton, executive director of the Texas Rural Education Association, “worryes that private schools won’t allow for the same transparency and accountability because they don’t have elected school boards.”¹⁵ College

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. James Tooley, “Private Schools for the Poor,” Foundation FEMI, <https://www.femi.org/wp-content/uploads//2017/08/Private-Schools-for-the-Poor-James-Tooley.pdf>.

15. Lopez.

professors David DeMatthews and David S. Knight write, “Private schools are also not held to the same standard of accountability as public schools.”¹⁶ The argument goes on to claim that any institution receiving “public money” should be held accountable to the same standards as government schools.

To be held accountable means that an individual is responsible for the consequences of his decisions and actions. It means that an individual who enacts a cause is answerable for the effects. Certainly, parents can speak to the school board and demand changes when they aren’t satisfied with the education their children are receiving. But if the board ignores those pleas, parents have little recourse. Political and other ideological considerations, not the needs, desires, and interests of students, often guide the policies of government schools.

Parents can also vote to replace the school board. However, if a majority of voters choose to retain the incumbents, the parent again has no recourse. The parent is forced to accept the choice made by the group—the majority. Individual parents cannot hold board members accountable for the results attained by **their** children. Parents concerned with the education that their child is receiving are virtually helpless within the government school system. If a government school is not meeting the needs, desires, and interests of a student, a parent has two choices: accept the undesirable education or endure the financial hardships of paying for a private school.

In contrast, private schools are far more accountable than government schools. Private schools must satisfy the needs and desires of students. If they fail to do so, those students can easily move to another school. Private schools are accountable to their customers—parents and students. Government schools are accountable to taxpayers (many of whom are not parents,) bureaucrats, and politicians, but not parents and students.

The argument that private schools aren’t accountable is akin to claiming that other private businesses—such as grocers, hairdressers, and doctors—aren’t accountable. In truth, private businesses are accountable to their customers. When a private business—including private schools—does not satisfy the needs and desires of a consumer, that consumer can take his business elsewhere. When individuals are free to choose and act accordingly, they can hold private businesses accountable by withdrawing their financial support. There is no rational reason why a private school should be accountable to anyone except parents and students.

The arguments against school choice are essentially arguments against freedom of choice.

School Choice Enables More Freedom of Choice

Many advocates of school choice claim that private schools do a better job educating students, while opponents of school choice claim that government schools do a better job. Both cite numerous studies to support their position. However, the fundamental issue isn’t whether private schools or government schools do a better job. The fundamental issue is freedom of choice.

In considering school choice, there are two questions that each of us must answer:

16. David DeMatthews and David S. Knight, “School voucher program is not right for Texas education, Waco Tribune-Herald, September 23, 2022, https://wacotrib.com/opinion/columnists/david-dematthews-and-david-s-knight-school-voucher-program-is-not-right-for-texas-education/article_2831fdc8-3a93-11ed-b3fd-73b80db97c23.html

1. Should individuals be free to choose how their money is spent?
2. Should parents be free to choose how their children are educated?

If we believe that individuals shouldn't be free to make choices regarding their lives and their children, then we should support government schools. However, if we believe that individuals should have freedom of choice, then school choice is a step in the right direction.

The proponents of government schools believe that taxpayers should subsidize the education of children who are not their own. They believe that parents should not be free to choose how their children are educated. They believe that taxpayers should be forced to finance government schools and parents should have minimal education alternatives.

The needs, desires, and interests of students are not monolithic. By their very nature, government schools simply cannot satisfy the diverse range of needs, desires, and interests of students. Certainly, some do a better job than others. However, as we have seen multiple times, government schools are founded on the premise that the well-being of the group supersedes the well-being of individuals. Inevitably, government schools will subordinate the needs, desires, and interests of some to the needs, desires, and interests of others.

The school choice movement holds that parents, not politicians and bureaucrats, should be making decisions about education. If we truly want the best educational opportunity for each child in Texas, then we must enable those who know a child best—his parents—to make those choices.

The Texas Institute for Property Rights provides analysis, training, and resources for legislators, businesses, organizations, and property owners.

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