

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

New Report Claims School Choice Drives School Improvement

What is the state of school choice in the United States and what effect is choice having on American education? Those are just two of the research questions addressed in an ambitious study released last month by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

The report, titled *Pursuing Innovation:*

How Can Educational Choice Transform K–12 Education in the U.S.?, starts out by looking at school performance as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress math and reading tests (see the latest

NAEP results on p. 4). Over the past 30 years, NAEP scores “have improved only modestly, and then only very recently,” according to the report. But since 1971, “Real, inflation-adjusted spending in the U.S. on K–12 education has increased almost 300 percent.”

Productivity Decline

Given the massive increase in spending and the near-stagnant student performance, educational productivity in the nation's schools has declined dramatically. “Productivity in 1970–71 was between 80 and 110 percent higher than productivity in 2011–12,” authors Patrick J. Wolf and Anna J. Egalite conclude.

How can the nation get educational productivity back on track? Mainstream economic theory generally holds that competition “tends to increase productivity.” Thus, “Moving from a more monopolistic system to a more competitive structure for K–12 education in the U.S....should enhance educational productivity, especially in the long run,” write the authors.

So what has been happening on the school competition front? There are a host of ways that public schools and districts can experience competition: residential school choice (when people shop for houses in neighborhoods with quality public schools), “intra-district choice programs, charter schools, homeschools, and private

schools.” With alternatives to assigned public schools becoming more common since the turn of the century, the authors conclude that “local public schools and school districts are experiencing somewhat more

pressure from competing educational organizations than they have in the past.”

Family-Financed Schooling

Indeed, “Family-financed private schooling is the only form of parental school choice that is on the decline in the U.S.” Tuition-paying students in private schools accounted for 5.3 million students in 2011, compared to 6.3 million in 2001. However, “all other forms of school choice are increasing.” Moreover, “Charter schooling and taxpayer-funded private school choice opportunities [i.e., vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, education savings accounts, etc.] are increasing at the fastest rate of all the school choice options.”

Charters and tax-funded private school choice also happen to be the “best candidates for placing direct and meaningful competitive pressure on the schools within local public school districts,” according to the report. “Students and dollars actually leave local public school systems (sometimes with delays and accommodations) when parents choose those alternatives

to neighborhood public schools, and the greater autonomy afforded to charters, private schools, and other providers creates more fruitful opportunities for innovation.”

Is Competition Effective?

Just how effective is competition in improving public school performance? The report notes this: “Thirty of the 42 evaluations of the effects of school-choice competition on the performance of affected public schools report that the test scores of all or some public school students increase when schools are faced with competition,” though the gains tend to be modest.

The authors offer recommendations to policymakers on how to “maximize the efficacy and productivity of competition-based education reforms” For example, they call for legislation that is “flexible and thoughtful enough to facilitate new models of schooling that have not been widely implemented yet, especially those that rely on technology to leverage learning.”

They also call on lawmakers to offer “innovation grants for schools willing to open in challenging communities with a history of significant dysfunction and deeply embedded social problems.”

Another piece of notable advice is, “Contain the urge to over-regulate.” They point out that “excessive flexing of regulatory muscle can choke innovation and lead to distortions in school supply.”

In the report's concluding paragraph, the authors ask, “Is competition from charter schools and taxpayer-funded private school choice programs improving the productivity of education in the U.S.?” Based on the “descriptive and analytic evidence,” they conclude that it is. “Could the payoffs be even larger in the future?” With “better policy designs,” “scaling up,” and “containing the urge to overregulate—most certainly the answer is: yes.”

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- Association Montessori International—USA
- Association of Christian Schools International
- Association of Christian Teachers and Schools
- Association of Waldorf Schools of N.A.
- Christian Schools International
- Council on Educational Standards and Accountability
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Friends Council on Education
- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
- National Association of Episcopal Schools
- National Association of Independent Schools
- National Catholic Educational Association
- National Christian School Association
- Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship
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- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
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Education Debit Cards: What's in Your Wallet?

When parents in Arizona qualify for Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, they receive a state-issued debit card coded for restricted use. So while the card won't work at, say, the local Starbucks, it will unlock a host of education-related products and services. The parent handbook for the program lists the approved spending categories: tuition and fees at a qualified school; educational therapies, tutoring services, test fees, textbooks, online learning programs, and the like. In short, the program provides parents a great deal of flexibility in designing an education that meets their child's needs.

Given all the available options, how exactly do parents in Arizona use the accounts? A new report from the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice has the answer. Written by Jonathan Butcher, education director at the Goldwater Institute, and Lindsey Burke, education policy fellow at The Heritage Foundation, the report looks at the spending decisions of families that participate in Arizona's version of an education savings account (ESA) program.

How Are Funds Being Spent?

Not surprisingly, 83 percent of the money spent by parents in the program was used for private school tuition. Next in line were expenditures on tutoring services (7 percent), followed by outlays for therapy (5 percent). All other eligible categories combined (e.g., textbooks, online courses, etc.) amounted to roughly 5 percent of expenditures within the program.

The 40-page report also charts the rapid increase in program participation from its modest start in 2011, when only 115 students took advantage, to the current school year, when over 2,400 students are benefiting. Private school participation has grown as well, up from 87 schools in 2012-13 to 149 schools in 2014-15. According to the report, ESA students "attended college prep schools, parochial schools (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish), Waldorf academies (which separate child development into stages), Montessori schools, schools dedicated to teaching individuals with autism, schools for the deaf, and international schools, among many others."

Part of what's driving the increase in student participation are changes in the law itself that have expanded the eligibility pool. When the

program was first approved in 2011, it was limited to students with special needs. In 2012, students attending public schools with a D or F rating from the state became eligible, as did children of active-duty members of the armed forces and adopted children who had been wards of the state. In 2014, siblings of ESA students were allowed to participate, along with preschool students with special needs. Then in 2015, the program expanded to include children living on Native American reservations in the state.

Even with the expansion in recent years,

Butcher and Burke believe the program should grow even more. Their first of three policy recommendations reads, "Allow more students to participate in an ESA program." They argue that every family "should have the chance to find a quality education for its child, and increas-

ingly, that means more than a classroom." The data, they say, demonstrate that "when given the opportunity, families will make multiple choices for how and where their child learns."

Adequate Funding

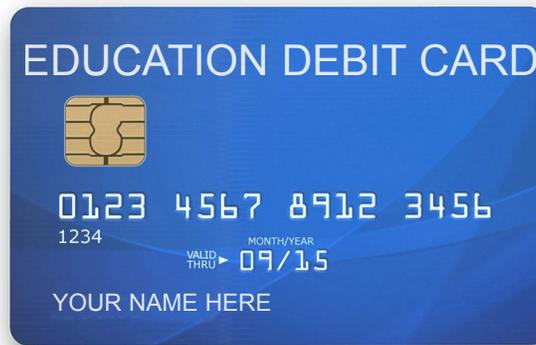
Their second recommendation is that accounts be funded at levels "adequate to provide a quality education." The report notes that the "average education savings account in Arizona is approximately \$5,000, whereas the average amount taxpayers spend per student in that state is nearly \$9,000." A child should not be "discounted from having access to the schools and other educational resources that will help him or her succeed."

Finally, the report recommends limiting regulations on providers and avoiding state testing mandates. "Policymakers should carefully write provisions that provide transparency to taxpayers and families but protect account holders' and private schools' autonomy."

Specifically regarding state tests, the authors point out that research "suggests that regulations such as state testing mandates discourage private school participation in school choice programs, limiting the choices available to families. Moreover, parents rank school outcomes on state tests as the least important information they consider when engaging in the school selection process."

The report is available at edchoice.org.

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Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability

Within a few short sentences, Boston University Professor Charles Glenn managed to provide an ultra-condensed version of his four-volume scholarly work, titled *Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability in Education*. Parents have an essential right to choose schools (freedom). Educators have a separate right to form schools that reflect “their distinctive understanding of the nature of human flourishing” (autonomy). While at the same time, society has a responsibility “to ensure that every child gets an adequate education” (accountability). The policy challenge, according to Glenn, is to balance all three elements without letting any one of them become overpowering.

Professor Glenn offered the Cliffs-Notes guide to his massive tome during a meeting of CAPE’s member organizations and state affiliates March 14 in Washington, DC. He is a member of CAPE’s board of directors.

The expansive compilation, which Glenn edited with Jan De Groof, provides an overview of education in 65 countries, captured in 88 chapters and over 1500 pages written by 100 or so international contributors.

Different countries strike the freedom/autonomy/accountability balance differently. Some, for example, rate high on allowing parents to choose schools while also rating high on regulating those schools, Glenn told the group. The locus of balance can affect matters such as staff selection, admission criteria, and curriculum.

Various Factors Drive Choice

On the freedom side of the equation, Glenn said parents choose schools based on a variety of factors, including safety, academics, the school’s values, and a culture geared toward helping children develop into the kinds of adults that parents would like them to be. The last point sometimes accounts for parents choosing faith-based schools sponsored by a religion different from the one they themselves practice, and often doing so in cases where they are displeased with what’s taking place in public schools.

Glenn drew a distinction between instruction and education. Instruction is the teaching of

skills and knowledge; education is “the shaping of character, the shaping of the human being.”

He reported that the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture is currently conducting a project on the effect of school cultures on the formation of character. The project is looking at how a variety of distinctive school settings deal with the moral and civic development of students. Settings include public

schools, independent schools, home schools, pedagogical schools, and various types of religious schools. (Glenn is in charge of studying Muslim schools.)

Many schools in the study, said Glenn, are wrestling with “how they are offering an alternative understanding of what education is all about,” in other words, an understanding of “what a

decent human being is, what it is to live a flourishing human life.”

Tough Times Ahead

Regarding their ability to offer an alternative vision of education at odds with mainline culture, private schools could be facing some tough times, according to Glenn.

In recent decades, private schools in the United States have had the luxury of not being “particularly controversial.” However, “we’re moving into an era in which private schools are going to find themselves very much controversial again,” he predicted. They will also likely find themselves the object of constant “micro-aggressions” for “being perceived as being outside the mainstream of what is tolerable in American culture.”

Ironically, the perception that they are at odds with prevailing trends could be an opportunity for private schools to serve a growing market of families who are deeply concerned about the influence of the culture upon their children. Indeed, the very extent to which private schools are outside that mainstream will determine their ability to attract such parents. The more they try to “fit in” with the surrounding culture, said Glenn, the more they will be in a “hopeless competition with charter schools,” which can do everything a private school can do except offer cultural distinctiveness.

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North Star

Fifty years ago, James Coleman published his massive, groundbreaking study “Equality of Educational Opportunity.” To mark the event, the school-reform journal *Education Next* devoted its spring 2016 issue to honor the eminent sociologist and his remarkable achievements.

EdNext Editor-in-Chief Paul Peterson called Coleman “the North Star of the school choice movement.” With his 1981 report analyzing data from the “High School and Beyond” (HS&B) study, Coleman “jump-started a school choice movement that has grown in substance and significance over the ensuing decades,” wrote Peterson.

In April 1981, the Associated Press captured the significance of Coleman’s findings this way: “A major new study, which concludes that students learn more in private high schools than in public schools, may figure in the current debate of whether the government should give tuition tax credits to parents of private-school pupils.”

Coleman’s report included startling findings that deserve a quick review. One example: “When family background factors that predict achievement are controlled, students in both Catholic and other private schools are shown to achieve at a higher level than students in public schools.”

Or how about: “Catholic schools more nearly approximate the ‘common school’ ideal of American education than do public schools.”

Coleman also concluded the “evidence is strong” to support the premise that private schools “provide a safer, more disciplined, and more ordered environment than do public schools.”

Such findings have indeed “jump-started” the school choice movement and have helped ensure that North Star James Coleman is, as Paul Peterson put it, “securely situated in a celestial constellation.”

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ The Associated Press captured the latest report card for 12th-graders this way: “The nation’s high school seniors are slipping in math and failing to make progress in reading, with just one-third of the 12th-graders ready for the academic challenges of college.”

Results were released April 27 for the 2015 12th grade mathematics and reading assessments from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average mathematics scale score was 152, down from 153 in 2013. The average reading score was 287, essentially the same as in 2013.

However, there were significant differences in performance by the type of school students attended. The mean math score for 12th-graders in public schools was 150, whereas the score for students in Catholic schools was 173. (Catholic schools were the only type of private school for which scores were available.) Put another way, 23 percent of public school students scored at or above the “proficient” level in math, compared to 48 percent of students attending Catholic schools.

In reading, the story was the same. The public school average scale score was 285, compared to a Catholic school score of 311. And while 36 percent of public school students reached or exceeded proficiency in reading, the same was true for 63 percent of Catholic school students, a 27 percent advantage.

★ The U.S. House of Representatives on April 29 approved the *Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Reauthorization Act* (HR 4901), which reauthorizes the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) through 2021 and earmarks additional funding for regular public schools and public charter schools.

The OSP, which was established in 2004, provides funds to allow low-income families to send their children to private schools. New provisions in the reauthorization require participating schools to be accredited.

The bipartisan legislation was supported by DC Mayor Muriel Bowser, a Democrat, and eight members of the DC City Council. The final vote was 224 to 181.

Before becoming law, a stand-alone bill would need approval by the Senate and a signature by President Obama. But this bill’s path to enactment will likely involve being folded into a larger must-pass, must-sign spending bill.

★ To help celebrate Earth Day (April 22) U.S. Secretary of Education John King announced the names of 47 Green Ribbon Schools for 2016, including six private schools. Schools were chosen “for their leadership in reducing environmental impact and utility costs, promoting better health for students and staff, and offering effective sustainability education.” CAPE congratulates all winners of the award, including Bishop O’Dowd High School, Oakland, CA • King School, Stamford,

CT • Wilmington Montessori School, Wilmington, DE • Paideia School, Atlanta, GA • Urban Community School, Cleveland, OH • St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes Middle School, Alexandria, VA.

★ CAPE welcomes its newest state affiliate, the Idaho Federation of Independent Schools. With the addition of Idaho, CAPE now has 37 affiliated organizations representing 38 states and territories.

★ The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) and Christian Schools International (CSI), two national members of CAPE, recently announced a cooperative partnership to improve services to member schools. The new agreement will allow schools to hold dual membership at discounted fees and to access services and products at reduced rates.

At the same time, both organizations will continue to remain separate entities with unique missions and traditions.

