

The Choice in “School Choice” is Mostly Government’s, Not Yours

Now in its second decade, National School Choice Week (observed January 23-29 this year) concentrates that movement’s steady, decades-long drumbeat into a few days of all-out advocacy. After two years of pandemic-related school closures, “remote learning,” and homeschooling from necessity rather than preference, this year’s National School Choice Week had its amplifiers turned to 11.

I’m all in favor of “school choice,” in terms of parents and students having the ability to choose the educational options they prefer, but it’s important to be realistic about who’s really making — and who’s entitled to make — which choices.

While the “school choice” movement pays lip service to homeschooling and other non-institutional options, it mainly emphasizes “public” charter schools and voucher or tax credit schemes for private schools. A perennial favorite slogan in favor of those alternatives is “funding should follow students, not institutions.”

The problem with that slogan is simple: Where there’s funding, the funder calls the tune. That’s especially true when the funder is government.

The charter / voucher / tax credit line of thinking doesn’t give new choices to taxpayers who don’t have children to educate. They’re still expected to write those checks, with no say in how the money is spent.

It does give additional choices to parents with children. They can send the kids to government schools (whether “regular” public schools or charter schools), or they can receive financing for private school tuition.

That, in turn, gives private schools a choice to make: They can turn down the money, or they can become de facto government schools.

This isn’t a hypothetical. We’ve watched it happen in higher education for nearly 80 years now.

Since the inception of the GI Bill, Pell Grants, and government-guaranteed student loans, formerly “private” colleges and universities have increasingly found themselves required to implement government-mandated standards on everything from curricula to athletics to hiring practices if they want to accept the students who bring that money with them, or receive federal grants for things like research.

The result: Of about 4,500 colleges and universities in the US, a grand total of 18 remain

truly private, refusing federal grants and declining to admit students who participate in federal student aid programs so that they retain full control of their admissions standards, curricula, etc.

The main practical (as opposed to philosophical) argument for “school choice” is that government-run schools fail to provide America’s children with quality educations.

How would turning the vast majority of private schools into clones of those government-run schools fix that problem?

The answer, as I tell my libertarian friends who mistakenly think of the charter / voucher / tax credit approach as “a move in the right direction” is that it wouldn’t. As both a practical and philosophical matter (for those who want less government involvement in education, period), it’s a move in the WRONG direction. It may increase choice in superficial ways, but it reduces choice where choice really matters.

Real “school choice” for taxpayers, parents, and students, as opposed to government, can only be achieved through separation of school and state.