

Why Teen Suicide Is Lower in States That Have More School Choice

Freedom is the precursor to happiness. When we're free, we feel in control of our lives and able to direct our own path. If we're unhappy, we can make changes and make different choices. If we are not free, we cannot make these choices. We cannot be our own agents, and so we suffer.

This suffering due to lack of freedom is becoming increasingly apparent throughout our mandatory system of mass schooling. Young people are required to attend their assigned district school under a legal threat of force. If they are fortunate enough to have access to a local charter school or have a parent or guardian who can remove them from school for homeschooling or a private school, they can escape the confines of their government-mandated schoolroom. But the vast majority of children in the US (approximately 85 percent) are locked (literally, these days) in a conventional public school classroom.

It's no wonder that as mass schooling consumes more of American childhood than ever before, beginning earlier and extending longer than at any other time in our history, young people are growing increasingly depressed.

Add to that a much more standardized and test-driven school curriculum over the last two decades, and you have a generation of young people pushed to the brink of their own emotional adaptability. They are hurting.

The statistics speak for themselves: According to data from the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the suicide rate of boys ages 15-19 increased 31 percent between 2007 and 2015, and the suicide rate of girls in that age range doubled during that same time period. What's more alarming is that a recent study published in the journal *Pediatrics* shows that suicidal thoughts and actions among children and adolescents decline during the summer months and spike during the school year—a pattern different from adults who experience higher suicide rates in summertime.

The finding that children are happier during the summertime when they have more freedom and more depressed during the school year when they don't should be a wake-up call to parents, educators, and policymakers. Freedom is the precursor to happiness. Adding weight to this correlation is new research showing that when children are granted the freedom to leave compulsory mass schooling through school choice mechanisms, their mental health dramatically improves.

Researchers Corey DeAngelis and Angela Dills found that states with generous charter school and voucher policies saw declines in adolescent suicide rates and that children who

attend private schools have better long-term mental health outcomes. Their research is the first to link school choice mechanisms with improved childhood mental health.

The findings should come as no surprise. When we have the freedom to leave an unhealthy or unsafe environment, our mental health should improve. When parents are empowered to employ their protective instincts to remove their child from a harmful place, their child should be happier. Freedom is the precursor to happiness.

If we care about children's emotional well-being and hope to stall the rising teen suicide rate, then we should embrace strategies that grant children more freedom and parents more choice. If we want happier young people, freedom is the best policy.