

UNRAVELING THE CASE AGAINST SCHOOL CHOICE

By Judi Amri, Islamic Schools' League of America

School choice proponents have been battling to prove the merits of school choice for more than a decade. Opposition from groups such as the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Schools Board Association has been fierce. Until recently, school choice advocates had little more than analogies, assumptions, and economic principles to defend their position.

Today numerous tax programs, approximately 79 privately funded voucher programs, 5 publicly supported voucher programs, and numerous charter schools provide ample empirical evidence that school choice is equitable, wanted, and works. A decade of research on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program proves that choice produces improved test scores (<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lab/reports/00-2tear.htm>). Even the major question of the constitutionality of school choice has been positively addressed in the recent Supreme Court ruling that upheld the Cleveland, Ohio voucher program.

The case against school choice is, indeed, unraveling. Many of the arguments against school choice have disappeared.

Misconceptions About School Choice

1. ***School choice will divert funds from public schools damaging the quality of those schools.***

The opposite has been proven to be true. Public schools don't lose money when students attend charter schools or private schools using vouchers. The amount of money provided to send a child to a charter school or to pay a voucher for use in a private school is less than what the public school receives to educate each child. Generally the difference stays behind with the public school. In addition, the Federal government provides voucher monies. The public school gets to keep all the monies provided by the State government.

There have been numerous examples in New York, Arizona, and other areas that demonstrate that competition is in fact improving public schools where school choice programs exist. Caroline Hoxby, a Harvard researcher, found that where school choice programs exist both public and private schools increased academic achievement and graduation rates improved.

2. ***Private schools will only select for admission into their schools the “cream of the crop” still leaving the poor behind in the worse schools.***

The most obvious argument to this assumption is that the “best” students will stay right where they are. Why would the move from a school where they are enjoying success? The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program found that it was the students in the most need that tend to leave the public school to enter a private school of their choice.

Public schools turn away many children with disabilities and behavioral problems and out-place them to private schools. Nearly 3,000 private schools across the country education 100,000 children with disabilities, many of whom were refused by public schools.

Many public schools, because of their location in affluent neighborhoods, are comprised of the “cream of the crop.” These schools aren’t criticized. At the same time, children who live in low-income neighborhoods are trapped in poorly performing schools. School choice addresses such inequity issues.

3. ***Private schools are risky because they lack accountability. They don’t have to adhere to the same rules that public schools adhere to.***

Private schools must comply with the same reporting regarding non-discrimination and financial practices. Unlike public schools, private schools are accountable to their customers—the parents. Public school spending has no correlation with declining student achievement. Don’t confuse **regulation** with **accountability**! Private schools tend to establish real measures of accountability and set higher standards of excellence, unhampered by valueless regulation. Remember—in a private school parents and students can choose to go somewhere else and their money goes with them.

4. ***Private schools will become more vulnerable to Federal regulation by accepting public monies in the form of vouchers.***

This is probably the most legitimate concern regarding school choice, in particular, voucher programs. The key to avoiding this risk is to have a well-designed choice program that protects the private school and which provides for periodic assessment and review. Some free-market advocates staunchly oppose any form of government support of private schools, but the reality is that private schools, in most states, are already subject to many basic

regulations in the areas of health, safety, non-discrimination, and financial reporting. Some states even impose regulations on curriculum content, length of the school year, and teacher qualifications. School choice would reinforce the numbers and strength of private schools thereby helping them to resist ineffective and meddlesome government regulation.

5. ***School choice just simply doesn't work.***

Numerous studies by researchers at Harvard, Georgetown, University of Wisconsin, Ohio State Department of Education, and many others indicate that students participating in school choice programs do better than their peers in public schools. For more information on specific studies please refer to "Selected Publications on School Choice" on the Center for Education Reform's web site (http://www.edreform.com/school_choice/).

Another important factor that proves that school choice works has to do with surveys of families participating in school choice programs. A survey by Jay Greene "A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know," indicates that "The evidence in support of school choice is "unambiguous and overwhelmingly positive." 50% of choice parents in Cleveland reported that they were "very satisfied" with the academic program, safety, discipline, and moral values of their private school compared to a similar response from only 30% of parents whose children were enrolled in the public schools there.

Parents believe that their children are better off in the private schools of their choice.

6. ***Using public funds for tuition at religious schools is unconstitutional.***

School choice cases have always argued that the vouchers do not violate the constitutional provision for separation of Church and State because the funds are given to the parents and the decision as to how that money is sent is directed by the parents of students and not the private schools.

Three State Supreme Court decisions (Jackson v. Benson in Wisconsin; Simmons-Harris v. Goff in Ohio; and Kotterman v. Killian in Arizona) have upheld the programs under the First Amendment. The final debunking of this legal argument came about when the Supreme Court of the United States upheld the Cleveland, Ohio voucher program this summer.

Our Position

The Islamic Schools' League of America (The League) believes that the school choice movement is good for our community based on our present understanding of the facts today. However, it goes without qualification, that it is in the interest of the Islamic schools that we make an effort to remain current of the facts, to keep an open dialogue, and to be prepared to promote or protect those policies that will have the most beneficial impact on Muslim children and Islamic schools. We encourage you to do the same.