

## Choice is best way to improve public schools

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In my last essay, I discussed the failings of the current public school system, one where paperwork trumps innovative teaching. What kind of system would be an improvement over the current one? I suggest a school system where the parents would have the ultimate power of choosing the schools that they view as best for their children. Schools would need to meet standards, and those that succeed would become more attractive to parents. Weaker performing schools would need to fire those who cannot do what needs to be done or are unwilling to put in the efforts required. Excellent teachers and administrators would be rewarded with bonuses and higher salaries. Today, in the current system, this cannot happen. The excellent teacher is not rewarded. The key to such a system would be to give all parents an equal financial ability to select their "public" school and thus to hold each school accountable to those parents.

I wish to emphasize what I said in the last essay, which is that there are many dedicated administrators and teachers. My point is that they are not rewarded appropriately and they are hamstrung by a rigid system that is not geared to encouraging innovative teaching.

The charter school system has the ability to better meet the needs of students. If one can merge the best aspects of the charter schools and those of the private schools, one would have a system in which parents have a significant say in how their children are taught and where the schools are flexible enough to attract and reward teachers who are able and willing to focus on the needs of the students. The missing element today is some competitiveness between schools. This can be engendered by allowing parents to select schools for their children in the same way that we do with college choice. The question is how to allocate funds. Here is one way.

Currently schools are funded through real-estate taxes, state taxes and federal support. It does not make sense that school quality be a function of the local price of housing. All children deserve an equal and high-quality education. The children depend on us, and society benefits when all are educated to their best abilities.

Since about two-thirds of our real-estate taxes are for education, I suggest that the revenues raised statewide in this way be transferred to the state level and follow the state income-tax rates, with the provision that this money be marked for school expenditures only and be allocated directly to all schools according to a formula that is based on student population. The money follows the student; therefore, each student and his parents essentially would have a vote with power at the school. Of course, schools have a limited population, as they do now, but one can anticipate that popular schools with a waiting list would be able to borrow money as corporations do, based on that waiting list, and expand facilities accordingly. Similarly, schools with declining or insufficient enrollment could go "out of business."

The funds that the state now allocates to public schools could be merged into the new funds collected through income taxes. The allocation of funds no longer has to be based on the economic strata of the location of the school. Rather, it would be based on how well the school is doing by virtue of the demand for its services. All parents, regardless of income, could vote for a good school by sending their child to a successful school. Schools could be started, or "adopted," by parent groups or by corporations, and the schools would need to meet appropriate standards. Teachers would still be certified, but some flexibility would be needed to attract people with education and dedication to teaching, but who are not certified. The administration of each school would have flexibility regarding salary and bonuses. Of course, the devil is in the details, but I propose this knowing that there are many difficulties and many opponents to changing the status quo. It could be possible to attempt this in one New Jersey county as a test. One may view this as regionalization not only of the schools but also of the funding and the latitude parents and students have in securing the kind of education they want.

This is an honest proposal. Clearly, a public discussion is needed.

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