

EDUCATION MATTERS

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The Future of School Choice

By Clint Bolick

If you were designing a K-12 education system from scratch, with no preconceived notions, and taking full account of the breathtaking technological innovations that have made possible a high-quality, highly personalized education for every child, what would that system look like?

Chances are that it would look little like the hidebound, bureaucratic, expensive, top-down, one-size-fits-all, command-and-control, inefficient, reform-resistant, administratively bloated, special-interest manipulated, obsolete, impersonal bricks-and-mortar system that represents the most disastrous failure of central planning west of Communist China and south of the United States Postal Service.

And yet, that is the system to which the majority of American schoolchildren are consigned. Little wonder that American high schoolers rank 21st out of 30 economically advanced nations in science literacy and 25th in math. Our nation cannot continue to thrive as long as our schools are pumping out mediocre graduates who cannot compete effectively in the world economy.

The proliferation of school choice—through open public school enrollment, magnet schools, charter schools, and





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The Rise of ESAs

The Goldwater Institute first developed the idea of education savings accounts in 2005. The idea is simple. For any eligible K-12 student who agrees to leave the public schools, the state will transfer roughly 90 percent of the per-pupil amount (leaving the local school district contribution behind) into an education savings account owned by the student’s family. The savings account can be used for any approved education expense, from private school tuition to distance learning, curriculum, software, tutoring, community college tuition, contributions to a 529 college savings plan, or discrete services offered by public schools. Any money remaining after high school graduation can be used for college.

For students using the savings accounts, the role of the state is fundamentally transformed from a provider of education into a funder or enabler of education. Education, in turn, is transformed from a package of services into a menu of choices. A student, for instance, can combine distance learning with a public school chemistry lab, a community college history course, and a personal math tutor. The possibilities are as diverse as the needs, skills, and interests of the students who will take advantage of them. At the same time, education savings accounts take the bureaucracy and pervasive special-interest influence out of education, lowering its cost and allowing market forces and technology to deliver highly personalized services to students.

Education savings accounts remained on the drawing board for several years, as Arizona steadily expanded its other school choice options. In 2006, the state legislature enacted the state’s first school voucher program, allowing disabled and foster children to use state funds for private school tuition. As happens almost every time a significant expansion of private educational options is adopted, a lawsuit was filed challenging the voucher program on behalf of groups who benefit from the educational status quo.

scholarship tax credits—has expanded educational opportunities and competition within American K-12 education. Charter schools, in particular, often provide world-class educational programs to a growing number of children, and they sometimes offer individualized, technology-based programs.

However most existing school choice programs provide variations of the same nineteenth-century model that continues to dominate K-12 education: classroom-based instruction in a bricks-and-mortar setting. The school choice programs operate within a system in which the majority of funding is directed toward school districts based on student counts. Charter programs make that funding transportable to particular types of alternative schools, but do not give families full control of funding to maximize opportunities for their children.

In Arizona, a new program provides for greater parental choice and more educational options than ever before: education savings accounts (ESAs). These accounts mark an important public policy breakthrough with enormous potential to create a truly twenty-first century system of K-12 education.

School choice opponents lost one of their primary legal weapons a decade ago when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, upheld the Cleveland school voucher program against a lawsuit contending that it violated the First Amendment's prohibition of establishment of religion. Since then, opponents have focused on state constitutional provisions to thwart school choice.

Their principal tool is the so-called Blaine amendments, which can be found in one form or another in two-thirds of state constitutions. The Blaine amendments, which were adopted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to thwart public support for Catholic schools, forbid the use of public funds for the benefit of "sectarian" schools.

Some state courts have ruled that vouchers are permissible under such provisions because vouchers benefit students rather than schools. The Arizona Supreme Court, however, in its 2009 decision in *Cain v. Horne*, ruled that the voucher program violated the state constitution because the only purpose to which vouchers could be applied was private school tuition. The Court left open the possibility that a program that provided broader choices might pass constitutional muster.

Enter education savings accounts.

An Urgent Need for Real School Choice

When students with disabilities were displaced from their school choice program following the *Cain* decision, the Arizona legislature responded quickly by enacting an education savings account program for them. The program promptly was challenged in court by the state teachers union and the Arizona School Boards Association, contending that the new program violates the Blaine Amendment. The Goldwater Institute joined the state in defending the program. In the opening round, Superior Court Judge Maria Del Mar Verdin upheld the program, holding that the wide range of services for which the accounts can be

used means that the program does not constitute aid to private schools. The case is currently pending in the Arizona Court of Appeals.

Meanwhile, Governor Jan Brewer this year signed into law a major expansion of education savings accounts. The expansion builds upon a tough new accountability system that gives letter grades to every public school based on annual student progress. As of the 2012-13 school year, approximately 100,000 students in public schools who received "D" or "F" grades now are eligible for education savings accounts.

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Arizona's program is drawing attention from education reformers nationwide, especially in other states, such as Florida, that have Blaine amendments in their constitutions. The need is urgent, especially for children who are poorly served by the current system. Roughly half of all black and Hispanic students drop out of school before graduation. Failure to graduate dramatically decreases employment opportunities and increases prospects for crime and welfare dependency. Education savings accounts provide learning alternatives that can keep at-risk students motivated and off the streets.

Education savings accounts are a catalyst for systemic change. Indeed, if the school choice movement has erred over the past decade, it is not because it has been too bold and radical but because it has not nearly been bold and radical enough. If we are to compete effectively in the dynamic global economy, we need, more than anything else, modern, high-quality education, freed from the shackles of the status quo. Education savings accounts are the way to get there. ■

Clint Bolick is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and also serves as the director of the Goldwater Institute Center for Constitutional Litigation in Phoenix. Before joining the Goldwater Institute in 2007, Bolick was president of the Alliance for School Choice, a national nonprofit educational policy group advocating school choice programs across the country.



Celebrate Teachers, Celebrate Choice.

AAE Signs on to National School Choice Week



AAE will once again join with other like-minded education organizations and schools in participating in National School Choice Week this January.

At AAE, we recognize that school choice is a vital component of the education reform movement. We know that students learn differently, so a one-size-fits-all learning environment does little to meet the needs of all stakeholders. To foster authentic learning, parents and students must have choices. As educators, we must also recognize school choice as a valuable tool for all parties.

AAE Executive Director Gary Beckner has called the movement invaluable to the teaching profession.

“Our primary goal as an organization is to empower, protect, and represent all professional educators,” he stated. “Once limited to rigid traditional school-terms and schedules, teachers are employed in traditional public schools, charters, private schools, religious schools, and online schools just to name a few. Educators will, in turn, have choices themselves when deciding when, where, and how to teach kids.”

As a professional association of educators, AAE recognizes that we are uniquely positioned to join the conversation and make sure AAE member voices are heard when it comes to school choice. By joining this network of organizations, we can directly affect policy that will have a profound impact on improving and modernizing education.

AAE looks forward to celebrating this important week with you! We will be hosting events across the country. Check our website periodically for updates on where we will be. ■

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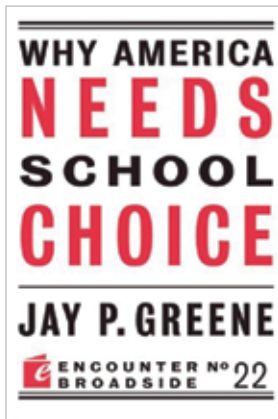
This January, the grassroots movement known as National School Choice Week will once again occur in cities across the country. School choice advocates across the nation will gather to shine a spotlight on effective education options for every child. According to organizers, their message is simple: “We need a K-12 education system that provides a wide array of options. We need an effective education system that has the flexibility to personalize and motivate students and allow parents to choose the school that is best for their children.”

National School Choice Week was created to provide a concentrated focus on the mission—a time for the media and the public to hear a resounding message and a time to bring new voices into the chorus. No one organization is behind this effort. The majority of the organizations working on events and rallies come from a variety of school reform organizations. While all may have a focus, including charter school growth and success, corralling out-of-control spending, or union accountability, each is equally important in broadcasting the message of an effective education system.

National School Choice Week needs your participation to succeed as a bullhorn for the school choice movement. Sign up for updates about this national upcoming event and stay tuned to learn how you and your colleagues can attend an event in your own backyard.

For more information, visit www.nationalschoolchoice-week.com. ■

Reading List: School Choice



Why America Needs School Choice

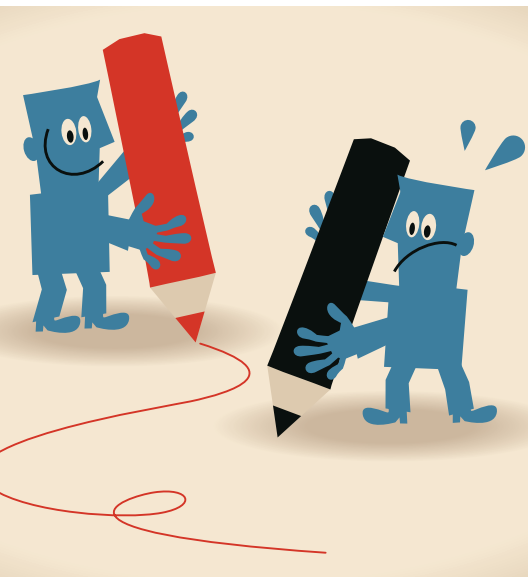
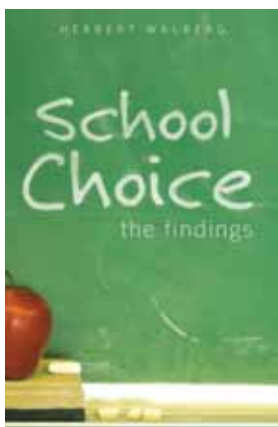
by Jay P. Greene

According to Dr. Greene, expanding school choice and competition is the single most important action we can take to improve America's schools. Although school choice faces strong opposition from powerful teachers unions and their entrenched political allies, expanding choice via public charters and tax credits has repeatedly been shown to improve student achievement, reduce segregation, promote civic values, and facilitate other productive reforms. This comprehensive, researched book outlines the case for school choice and shows how it is the most appealing strategy for anyone serious about educational reform.

School Choice: The Findings

by Herbert J. Walberg

School Choice: The Findings is the most comprehensive and up-to-date survey available summarizing the research on charter schools, vouchers, and public versus private school effectiveness. The focus is on rigorous studies—those using randomized control groups (as in medical research), those that monitor achievement changes over time, and those based on large numbers of students. The findings reviewed here go beyond academic achievement, covering students civic engagement, cost comparisons across school types, and public and parental opinion about schools and school choice. The consensus of this research overwhelmingly favors competition and choice in education. ■



Sound Off:

Do you have opinions or firsthand knowledge of school choice in action? Let AAE know!

What do you think about school choice? Are you a parent benefiting from school choice policy? Do you love teaching in a virtual or public charter school? Do you support open enrollment in your state or district? Make your voice heard. Email AAE with your letters, comments, or articles for consideration in future editions of *Education Matters*. Email editor@aaeteachers.org.



Teachers and Students: Together for Reform

Although some teachers union executives have tried to drive a wedge between teachers and reformers advocating on behalf of students, the reality is that most good teachers are also frustrated with the status quo in education today. As a new generation of college students graduate only to find the job market in shambles, some are still trying to give back to the education system by becoming teachers. J.M., a good friend of mine since childhood, teaches at the MATCH program in Boston, a program designed to help prepare inner-city Boston students to succeed in college and life. I asked her some questions about her experiences there. J.M. became an English teacher because she loves her subject and her students. As she says, “I find teaching really satisfying. I love seeing that moment where a student understands something—the ‘aha!’ moment.”

Instead of going through a traditional teaching program, J.M. chose the MATCH program because it taught practical techniques rather than theory, and she felt that this was

the best way to “learn how to be an amazing teacher.”

Charter school laws allow the schools to operate outside of existing public union contracts and work rules; school administrators can hire and fire based on the strategies they find to be successful for their students. J.M. says her experience as a teacher would be radically different in a traditional public school:

“If I were teaching at a traditional public school, my experience would be hugely different. I would have way less support as a first year teacher... [at MATCH] I don’t have to worry about what my students learn in other classrooms; in terms of behavior, the standards are uniform.”

Similarly, J.M. believes her students would have had a worse experience in what she calls Boston’s “atrocious” traditional public school system. Her students get two hours of extra tutoring a day, and she and her colleagues sometimes stay until 7:30 pm or later to help with homework, or drive across town to pick up a stranded student for school.

“My students would have a completely different experience [at a traditional public school]. . .their tutors support them every day for two hours of practice and remediation, and their teachers not only know their names but care about their lives. We are absolutely committed to our students. . .”

“My students would have a completely different experience [at a traditional public school]...their tutors support them every day for two hours of practice and remediation, and their teachers not only know their names but care about their lives. We are absolutely committed to our students, and to helping them get into and succeed in college.”

All American students deserve a chance at the American Dream, and getting a good education is especially indispensable for kids who might not get many other “legs up” in their lives. Union work rules in traditional public schools prevent the kind of flexibility that good teachers like J.M. often require, especially when serving students who face challenges in their home environments.

When it comes to providing an excellent education for American students, education reformers, students, and teachers should all be on the same side. ■

Inez Feltcher is a reform advocate and student at UC San Diego.

What Teachers' New Year's Resolution Should Be

A conversation with a young, first-year teacher on Christmas Day had me contemplating the problems in education and how we should solve them. Every reformer from Sacramento to Brooklyn has some idea about how to fix education in America. The answer to this monumental issue, I believe, may be contained in one simple New Year's resolution that every teacher and administrator, new and old, should make. The New Year's resolution is simply stated:

"This year, I promise to throw away the education blueprint."

The conversation began with me asking the young teacher if she assigns homework. The reply, as you might imagine, was a resounding "Yes." Calmly, I asked "Why?" With very little hesitation, the eager young teacher declared that her students need to be responsible. Quoting almost verbatim from Alfie Kohn's *The Homework Myth*, I told her that there is no research to support the notion that homework teaches responsibility.

What I learned in the aforementioned discussion with the first-year teacher is that we continue to churn out new teachers from the same old blueprint—one that creates automatons who believe that teaching is comprised of worksheets, homework, and summative assessment.

She quickly backpeddled, amending with the old "homework-provides-practice" defense. Students need to demonstrate that they have learned a concept through homework, she said. I forged politely ahead, saying that bad practice will only frustrate her students.

Are there points attached to the homework, I asked. She confirmed that there were and that if assignments weren't complete, students received a zero. She seemed proud of this last point, as if it were some sort of victory over a deadly enemy.

Now, students are punished for not completing useless homework, which leads them to hate both school and learning, I proposed. The response to this declaration was the most astonishing of all: "My students will always get homework," the youngster announced, showing no deference to any argument I made, in spite of my nearly twenty years of classroom experience.

The problem is with the blueprint

Please understand that this enthusiastic newbie is not the problem. She may be a good teacher; she certainly has good intentions and a desire to succeed. The problem is with the same blueprint that we've been using in education for centuries. The one that college professors and cooperating teachers, most of whom should have retired many years ago, have been using forever.

The blueprint says that teachers, regardless of grade or subject area, should do the following: deliver information, have students write the information in a notebook, assign ill-conceived homework, purportedly related to the information; then, have the students complete multiple choice assessments, demonstrating that they have memorized the information that the teacher has delivered.

Teachers are stuck in a time capsule

I was puzzled by the first-year teacher's attitude toward homework, grading and even feedback to parents—so much that it stuck with me for weeks after that Christmas-Day discussion. Where does an intelligent, well-educated individual get such antiquated ideas, and why is she so resolute that she is unwilling to listen to someone she trusts, someone with nearly two decades of teaching experience?

It's because like most teachers, she is stuck in a time capsule, ruled by an ancient blueprint. So, I wondered, how can I stand up against that damned, centuries-old blueprint, when leading researchers like Alfie Kohn, William Glasser, and Edward Deci can't make a dent in it?

The only answer, I reasoned, is to be resolved to throw out the blueprint, which I have done by creating a Results Only Learning Environment. Essentially, I have created my own blueprint, based on the research of the aforementioned luminaries and a few other people who understand teaching and learning and intrinsic motivation.

My blueprint is not the only one, but it is certainly better than the old one—the one handed to new teachers and the one used by most current teachers. Something that's been around this long is almost universally accepted as the only one that works, yet virtually every major corporation in the world works from a new blueprint. The Model T, typewriter and one-room schoolhouse have all been replaced.

Only teachers continue to use the original blueprint, even though it's hundreds of years old. Isn't it time to join the likes of Ford and Remington—two major corporations that have successfully built new models?

Shouldn't you resolve to throw away the blueprint? ■



Mark Barnes is a language arts teacher in Ohio. He runs learnit5.com, a website for educators searching for how-to videos for technology in the classroom. Don't miss Mark's book *ROLE Reversal: Achieving Amazing Results in the Student-Centered Classroom*, due February, 2013 by world education leader, ASCD.



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