

# Rising Tide:

## Why people who care about public education should support school choice

Many people view support for public education and school choice as competing policy goals rather than complementary strategies for improving educational outcomes. This perception is not surprising, given that many of us remember our public school experiences with pride and affection, and would never do anything that could hurt public schools or the many children who rely on them.

Unfortunately, the public schools of today are often different than those we attended. Virtually all Americans agree that the overriding goal for America's public education system is the provision of high quality educational opportunities for every child. Public schools are the primary mechanism for achieving that goal. But today, many public schools fall short in providing the opportunities every child deserves. We should insist on reforms that make public schools better and ensure that children have access to a good education today.

We challenge the conventional wisdom that school choice detracts from the mission of public schools or harms them. To the contrary, school choice properly devised provides additional means for reaching the goal of providing high quality education to every child, while providing a proven incentive to make public schools better. School choice is the tide that lifts all boats.

## Public Schools Work for Many, But Not All

The state of American public education is a mixed bag. In a 2005 study of national graduation rates, education researchers Jay Greene and Marcus Winters found that nationally, the percentage of public high school graduates with the skills and qualifications necessary to successfully attend college increased from 25 percent in 1991 to 34 percent in 2002.<sup>1</sup>

But the system works better for some than others. The students for whom the system works the least well are predominantly poor and minority students. Greene found that in the class of 2002, approximately 78 percent of white students graduated from high school with a regular diploma, compared to 56 percent of black students and 52 percent of Hispanic students. Though educational prospects have improved somewhat for black students over the past 20 years, they still lag

**“Children are our most precious resource. Our society and our system of education are failing many of these children. The children who are failed the most are poor children of color.”**

Howard Fuller, Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning, Marquette University

behind prospects for white students, according to data from the National Center on Education Statistics. For Hispanics, the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, there is little evidence of academic progress.

Reflecting the universal desire to provide high quality educational options for every child, the bipartisan legislation known as “No Child Left Behind” imposed new accountability requirements on public schools. One requirement is that public

schools consistently failing the state's performance criteria must allow students in those schools to transfer to better performing public schools if space is available. In 2002, only 194 slots in better performing schools were available to the 30,000 Baltimore schoolchildren attending failing schools. In Los Angeles, 223,000 students were enrolled in failing schools and no seats were available in better performing schools. There is simply not adequate space in better performing public schools to accommodate demand.

<sup>1</sup> The complete study, entitled “Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002,” Jay Greene & Marcus Winters, Manhattan Institute, February 2005 is available at [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp\\_08.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_08.htm) and at our website: [www.allianceforschoolchoice.org](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org).

## Higher Education Has Choice

By contrast, America's system of postsecondary education is the world's envy. Here, students are free to use public funds in either public or private institutions of higher education. For example, a Boston college student determines for himself whether to take his publicly funded Pell Grant to the University of Massachusetts, Boston College, Brandeis or Harvard. The Pell Grant is available to help that student get a good education. Within the system of higher education, a diverse array of public, private and religious colleges is available to meet the needs of prospective students.

Moreover, that system adapts and improves in response to the choices made by students.

### If Money Were the Answer

It is clear that money alone is not a panacea. State aid to K-12 education grew from \$106 billion in FY 1991 to

are spending upwards of \$16,000 per student, with precious little to show for it.

While funding is important, more important is how it is spent and who controls it. In many urban public schools, 50 cents of every educational dollar is absorbed before it reaches the classroom. As John Chubb and Terry

Moe found in *Politics, Markets & American Schools*, published over a decade ago by the Brookings Institution, the capacity of parents to leave schools

in which they are dissatisfied forces the schools to provide a high-quality educational product.

**In many urban public schools, 50 cents of every educational dollar is absorbed before it reaches the classroom**

\$201 billion in FY 2001, an increase of \$95 billion or 90 percent over the decade, according to the Census Bureau. Public schools in Newark, N.J.

## School Choice Creates Opportunities for Success

School choice changes the equation of public education in two ways. It gives power to parents of modest economic means or whose children are in poor-performing schools to choose better public schools. And it frees schools to compete for those children and the dollars they command. Both features create systemic change.

While the roots of school choice can be traced to America's founding fathers, the concept of parental choice in education more fully matured through the work of such divergent thinkers as Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman in the 1950s and University

of California law professor John Coons two decades later. The idea moved from drawing board to the real world in 1990 with the creation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Other school choice programs followed in Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Ohio and the District of Columbia, demonstrating the widespread demand for educational options. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Cleveland scholarship program in the historic *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* decision. That landmark decision held that so long as religious schools are

only one of the educational options and parents choose where their children's educational funds are spent, school choice programs are in harmony with the constitutional prohibition of the establishment of religion.

All contemporary school choice programs are targeted toward children who are economically or otherwise disadvantaged. As a result, they move us toward fulfilling the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* of equal educational opportunities for all schoolchildren.

## School Choice is Positive for Public Schools

School choice provides an educational life preserver for children who desperately need it. But what about the vast majority of children who remain in public schools? Fortunately, the evidence demonstrates that school choice lifts all boats.

First, school choice does not necessarily mean a reduction in funds for public schools. To the contrary, states like Wisconsin and Florida have created school choice programs while

substantially increasing public school funding. Moreover, because students who leave public schools take only a portion of their funds, the result is greater per-pupil funding for children in public schools.

More importantly, studies by Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby find that wherever public schools are faced with meaningful competition, they improve. School choice helps children who leave and those who remain.

**Wisconsin and Florida simultaneously created school choice programs and substantially increased public school funding**

# School Choice is a Proven Model for Achieving Results

## The Milwaukee Experience

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is the nation's oldest targeted program, giving low-income families vouchers of up to \$5,943 as full payment of tuition in private schools, either religious or non-religious. Private schools participating in the program must admit all eligible choice students and use a random selection process when applications exceed available space. This requirement ensures that all students have equal opportunity to participate in the program and prevents the "skimming" of the best students.

The program began in 1990 with 341 students at seven schools and has grown to 15,035 students at 118 schools in 2004-05. The per-student cost of the MPCP is about half that of Milwaukee public schools (MPS). From 1990 to 1999 real MPS spending grew 25 percent, while enrollment was up 8 percent. State aid to MPS also grew by 61 percent and the property tax burden decreased for residents by 30 percent.

Prior to the establishment of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, a typical student in Milwaukee public schools had less than a 50 percent chance of graduating. Only 15 percent of children whose families received government assistance graduated and those that did had an average grade point average of less than 2.0—just above a "D." Children from poverty stood little chance of acquiring the skills they would need to grow into a better life.

In a 2004 study of Milwaukee's graduation rates, researcher Jay Greene found that choice students graduate high school at much higher rates than students in its public schools<sup>2</sup>. What's more, their graduation rates are higher than those at selective public high schools whose students are likely to be more advantaged in their background than choice students, who are disproportionately poor and minority. In

the graduating class of 2003, students using vouchers to attend private high schools had a 64 percent graduation rate. That same year, the 37 Milwaukee public high schools for which data are available had a combined graduation rate of 36 percent. Milwaukee's six academically selective public high schools had a combined graduation rate of 41 percent in 2003.



school's tuition and fees. In 2002-03, approximately 2.5 million K-12 students were served by Florida's public schools. In that year, per-pupil spending was \$6,411, higher than the maximum scholarship of \$4,537, which resulted in savings to the state.

Recent statistics indicate that Florida is narrowing the racial academic gap. On the

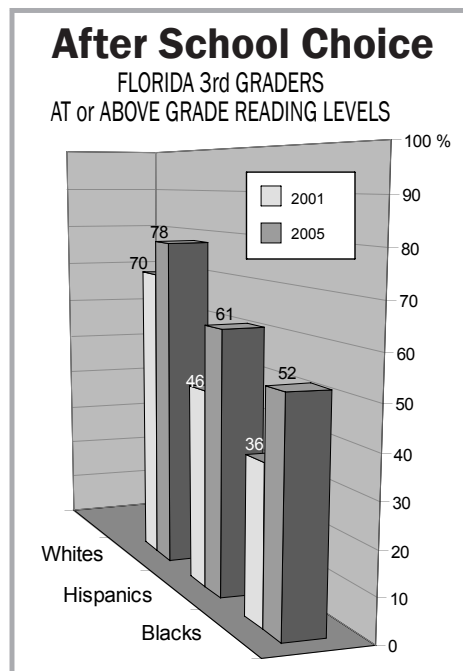
2005 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), 78 percent of white third-graders, 61 percent of Hispanic third-graders and 52 percent of black third-graders scored at or above grade level in reading this year. That compared to 70 percent of white third-graders, 46 percent of Hispanic third-graders and 36 percent of black third-graders in the 2001 assessment.<sup>3</sup>

A state-sponsored evaluation of the A+ scholarship program found positive effects of the voucher program on the state's public schools. "The Florida A-Plus Program is a school accountability system with teeth . . . The evidence . . . suggests that the A-Plus Program has been successful at motivating failing schools to improve their academic performance. In addition, the evidence . . . suggests that we should have confidence that the improvement in academic achievement is a real improvement and not merely a manipulation of the state's testing and grading system."<sup>4</sup>

In Florida, Milwaukee and elsewhere, public schools are responding to parental choice by improving academic performance, providing educational options to students and parents and more appropriately spending public funds on the worthy goal of high quality education for all school children.

## The Florida Experience

Florida offers a number of choice programs for its schoolchildren. The first was the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program, which allows students who attend a Florida public school that has twice received a failing grade to transfer to another school through the use of a voucher. The average scholarship size is \$4,200. The scholarship must be accepted as full payment of a private



<sup>2</sup> This report, entitled "Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee," Jay Greene, Manhattan Institute, September 2004, is available on the internet at: [http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/data/research/grad\\_rate.pdf](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/data/research/grad_rate.pdf) and at our website [www.allianceforschoolchoice.org](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org).

<sup>3</sup> These and additional FCAT results are available at <http://fcats.fldoe.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> This 2002 study, entitled "When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement," Jay Greene and Marcus Winters may be found at [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp\\_02.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_02.htm) or on our website at [www.allianceforschoolchoice.org](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org). For a review of the impact of school choice on Florida public schools, see also <http://www.ij.org/schoolchoice/florida/innerreport.html>.

“Choice can be a useful tool to aid families and educators in inner city and poor communities where education has been a struggle for several generations. . . . If programs are devised correctly, they can provide meaningful educational choices to families that do not now have such choices. And it is not trivial that most people in America . . . already have such choices.”

John Witte, *The Market Approach to Education – An Analysis of America’s First Voucher Program*, Princeton University Press, 2000

## Where We Stand

Parents of means can enroll their children in a school of choice without need for changes in legislation. They can choose the neighborhood where they buy a home to take advantage of the best local schools; some are able to pay twice for their children’s education—once through their tax bill and again through private school tuition. Too many Americans do not have those options, and most live in poor, inner-city neighborhoods. True educational opportunity will happen only through systemic reform.

What is systemic reform? A succinct summary of what is required has been offered by Jay Greene in a report to philanthropists who have invested millions in K-12 education:

*The only realistic strategy for reform by philanthropists is to leverage*

*their private giving by attempting to redirect how future public expenditures are used. . . . There are a number of ways in which philanthropists can reasonably hope to alter future public expenditures. They can support*

**“Without altering the incentives or structures of public education, philanthropic efforts are like trying to reshape the ocean without dykes or channels—the water will just run back off into the sea.”**


Jay Greene, Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research

*research and advocacy efforts that inform education policy debates; they can create new kinds of public schools or administrative structures through which public dollars will flow; and they can develop alternative professional associations and credentials that have the potential of altering the political activities of educators or government*

*regulations affecting who can become an educator. . . . Without altering the incentives or structures of public education, philanthropic efforts are like trying to reshape the ocean without dykes or channels—the water will just run back off into the sea.*

Our efforts at the Alliance for School Choice are centered on advancing public policy solutions to bring equal opportunity for quality education to all Americans.

We believe this is

best accomplished by ensuring that all parents have the chance to choose the best educational environment for their children, whether a public school, private school, charter school, magnet school, distance learning or home schooling. We are less concerned with where learning takes place than whether it takes place at all. 

For more information about the issues surrounding school choice including research, current news and articles, and existing programs around the nation, visit our website at <http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org>

The Alliance for School Choice is a national nonprofit policy organization devoted exclusively to promoting school choice programs, primarily for economically disadvantaged children. Together with its sister lobbying organization, Advocates for School Choice—and in close collaboration with state and national allies—the Alliance is devoted to assisting local efforts toward the implementation of successful and transformative school choice programs throughout the country.



**ALLIANCE FOR SCHOOL CHOICE**  
*Making Good on the Promise!*