

School Choice and Public Schools

Is school choice a contest between public and non-public schools?

School choice is not an us v. them debate between public and non-public schools. Parents have a moral obligation to educate their children; the community is obligated to support parents in fulfilling this duty. Thousands of Catholic students attend public schools all over Pennsylvania; thousands of non-Catholic students attend parochial and diocesan schools. School choice is a public program that supports and empowers parents with options to determine the best school for their individual child. Public school may be the right choice for one student, but it may not meet the needs of another.

An education system based solely on geography has trapped many students in schools that are not helping them to reach their potential. Financial realities often preclude parents from paying tuition or moving to another neighborhood with a school that best suits their children. Parents who pay their school taxes deserve assistance in the exercise of their right to choose a non-public school, if that is best for their children. School choice legislation that includes a voucher program and an increase in EITC scholarships is a step in the right direction toward expanding those opportunities to more parents.

Will school choice drain resources from public schools?

No. Real world experience and evidence show that states and cities with school choice programs have not seen their public school budgets go down (Source: [The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice](#)). When students leave public schools using voucher programs, they free up more money for the students who remain. Taking a student out of public school removes the cost of educating that student. Most of these savings remain in local school budgets where they benefit other students; the rest of the savings go back into state budgets.

A decade ago, school choice opponents made the same claim in their arguments against Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program calling them a back-door approach to vouchers; but since 2001, state spending for public schools has increased dramatically. State subsidies increased more than 30% and local construction and debt spending have doubled. (Source: [Commonwealth Foundation](#))

What will school choice cost?

Taxpayers support education as a matter of common good. Tax dollars will be spent one way or another on the education of each child; those dollars should follow the child. Non-public schools provide an excellent education, often for a fraction of the cost of educating the same student in a public school. In Pennsylvania, the average annual public school spending per pupil is \$14,535 (2009-2010); the base cost of the state's subsidy per pupil is \$8,950. Average non-public school tuition is \$3,500 (elementary) and \$6,500 (high school). By allowing some students to be educated in less costly non-public schools, school choice will offset the need for future tax increases or state budget cuts. In fact, non-public schools already save tax dollars. If every non-public school student returned to public school, the costs would be unbearable. If every one of Pennsylvania's 287,092 non-public school students returned to public school, the costs would be significant. $287,092 \times \$14,535 = \4.17 billion annually (not counting the costs of new construction).

School choice legislation that includes both a voucher program and an increase in EITC scholarship funds makes good educational sense and can be part of a fiscally responsible state budgetary strategy.

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