

By Mark R. Howard



Editor's Page

The Power of Choice

The Florida Supreme Court may have removed two amendments relating to the use of vouchers in the public school system from the November ballot, but the issue of introducing more choice into the schools won't go away, nor should it.

I began wrestling with the idea of school choice 25 years ago in Tennessee, where I worked briefly for that state's Department of Education. In a mostly rural county in east Tennessee, there were two school districts — one operated by a city, one by the county. The city district's schools were superior — significantly so. Some provision allowed parents in the county to send their children to the city schools as long as they provided their own transportation. Several hundred families, a considerable number in that neck of the woods, made that choice. The district-switching families included many lower-income people who were more than willing to endure the expense and hardship of driving their children to a city school in exchange for a better education for their children.

The governor of Tennessee back then, Lamar Alexander, talked of expanding parents' ability to choose their children's schools but didn't get far — his political opponents conjured visions of choice leading down a slippery slope toward educational chaos and breaching the church-state wall. Many education officials who eagerly implemented other reforms Alexander pushed also were uncomfortable with expanding choice.

So was I. It struck me, however, that several educators I respected said privately that choice was the most powerful force that could be brought to bear in pushing schools to innovate. Indeed, the county district began taking steps to improve so that fewer children would leave. The superiority of the city schools, it was clear, wasn't a matter of funding, but rather one of higher standards and better management.

Much of what I observed and learned about schools since then, including my two children's experiences in public school, has pushed me steadily, if reluctantly, toward the choice camp. It's simply not true, as teachers unions and school boards like to claim, that there's not enough money. Nor is it true that innovations like charter

schools or the use of vouchers represent a "diversion of resources" from public schools. A 2007 Collins Center report found that the Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship voucher program didn't divert money from public schools and in fact produced some \$140 million in savings — in effect, that program subsidized the education of the students who remained in the public system. The program allows companies to donate to a fund that qualified low-income children can use to attend private schools.

Nor is it true that more widespread use of vouchers disadvantages low-income and/or minority children. Indeed, they are exactly those most likely to benefit from choice and those who are among the most hungry for it, as shown by Florida's Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship and Opportunity Scholarship programs and others elsewhere. In Washington, D.C., an opportunity scholarship program for children from low-income families has drawn about four applications for each available scholarship since 2004. Those scholarships can be used to attend a private school in the district, which spends more than \$14,000 per pupil (Florida spends about \$8,000), but lags behind every other state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, according to the Heritage Foundation.

I am still troubled by church-state issues that choice creates — why should I as a taxpayer fund a religious education that orients the student toward showing up at my doorstep on Saturday morning to try to convert me? But the church-state wall is already Swiss-cheesy: Pre-kindergarten programs, Bright Futures and the McKay scholarships for students with disabilities all send taxpayer funds to private schools and institutions with religious affiliations. Nearly two-thirds of the money paid to participating private schools under the McKay program goes to religious schools, according to the Florida Depart-



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ment of Education. Groups like the ACLU that fight Opportunity Scholarships tooth and nail but look the other way on McKay and Bright Futures are either hypocritical or at best highly selective in their outrage.

Perhaps the strongest argument for more choice in public education is the degree to which the public schools already have introduced elements of choice — International Baccalaureate programs, magnet schools, “fundamental” schools, alternative schools and charter schools. My daughter has thrived in an International Baccalaureate program that I would choose over any private education I could purchase in Pinellas County. To a large degree, market pressure — the threat that large numbers of middle-class and other parents would abandon the system — led to those innovations.

The success of those approaches ought to make the public schools confident rather than fearful about their ability to compete in an environment with more choice. Educators do not get up in the morning and set their jaws with determination to go out and produce a 50% dropout rate or big percentages of students who can't read at grade level. They don't change because the system creates no incentive to change — innovation isn't rewarded, and failure isn't punished.

And so if a privately operated public charter school wastes money or is ineffective, it has to do better or it

closes. The same, however, is never true of the publicly operated school around the corner. And so blindingly incompetent teachers at my son's middle school can teach pretty much what they choose, once tenured, with impunity. And so the school considers it more important to count and store textbooks at the end of the year than for students to have textbooks through the close of school. The school collects the students' books with about two weeks of school left, and those last weeks tend to be filled with lots of video watching, class parties and farewells rather than instruction. It's just one of a host of lessons that communicate to both students and teachers a lack of urgency or seriousness about learning. Meanwhile, barely more than half of the school's eighth-graders meet state FCAT standards in reading; less than 40% meet the science standards.

This is what critics of the public school system mean when they refer to school systems operating in the interests of buildings and employees rather than the children they are supposed to teach. Any monopoly — whether it's a phone company, utility, newspaper or school system — can change and can improve the service or good it provides. But no monopoly tends to change much until its customers have choices and can take their business elsewhere.