

The Lie of School Choice

What is “school choice?”

“School choice” (also known as “parent choice”) is a catch phrase for “vouchers,” “tax credit scholarships,” or “education savings accounts,” which direct taxpayer dollars to private schools to cover the cost of tuition.

What’s so bad about that?

Public schools are required by law to accept every child, including those who have learning deficits or disabilities. Private schools have no such obligation. The “choice” is actually made by the school, not the parent. When public tax dollars are allowed to go to private schools, funding required to educate every child is depleted. While public schools are subject to intense scrutiny, adhere to high standards, and are transparent to the public, private schools have no accountability. Vouchers and other privatization schemes open the door for fraud, waste, and weakening of the public school system.

Who supports “school choice?”

National organizations that stand to profit from public tax dollars are running aggressive campaigns all over the country to privatize public schools. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Americans for Prosperity, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the American Federation for Children are just a few national groups that use campaign donations and lobbying to influence Mississippi lawmakers.

Locally, Empower MS is the organization that fronts some of these groups, supporting legislation to privatize our education system. In the 2015 election cycle, Empower MS funneled over \$300,000 to state legislative campaigns to defeat incumbent lawmakers who support public education. They were successful in several districts, essentially removing the voice of the voter in exchange for lawmakers who will rubber-stamp a national agenda here in Mississippi.

The same lawmakers who say they want to improve education through “school choice” measures also oppose full funding of public schools that accept every child and educate 90% of Mississippi children.

But does “school choice” help student achievement?

Long-term studies of voucher programs in Milwaukee (the oldest school choice/voucher program in the U.S.), Cleveland, and the District of Columbia found “no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers.”¹

Milwaukee requires its voucher students to take the same Wisconsin state tests used in the public schools. This allows a comparison of private school voucher students and public school students, all of whom reside within the city of Milwaukee. Performance results from the 2013-2014 school year showed slightly lower proficiency rates for voucher students in both math and reading as compared to their public school peers.²

A 2012 study of Florida’s tax credit (voucher) program showed that test score gains of private school voucher students were virtually identical to those of income eligible students remaining in Florida public schools, even though private voucher schools can pick and choose their students.³

What has happened in states that have implemented “school choice?”

In states where vouchers have been implemented, fly-by-night private schools with unqualified administrators and teachers have opened to take advantage of voucher money. Millions of tax payer dollars have been wasted at schools that eventually close due to mismanagement or fraud. The Florida Department of Education conducted an investigation of 38 schools suspected of defrauding the John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities program. In 25 cases, allegations of fraud have been substantiated. These schools received McKay money totaling \$49.3 million public dollars.

1 Keeping Informed about School Vouchers, A Review of Major Developments and Research, July 2011, Center on Education Policy

2 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Fourth year of choice school data, 2014

3 Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Program, University of Florida, Northwestern University, and National Bureau of Economic Research, 2012