

17. Parental Choice

PARENTS of all income levels should have the opportunity to choose for their children the best educational options available to them, whether in public, private, religious, or home schools. Students should be free to attend a safe and effective school rather than being assigned to a chronically underperforming school. The current monopoly system, in which government is both the primary funder and provider of education, has not served students well. A system based on competition, freedom, flexibility, and accountability to parents will produce a higher level of excellence and better equip the next generation of Americans.

by *Dan Lips*

Notes

Recommendations

1. Make the D.C. voucher program a success. The voucher program enacted for Washington, D.C., is a real opportunity to show the advantages of parental choice in education. The program is helping 1,700 students and has proved very popular with parents. Another 1,700 children are on a waiting list to receive vouchers. Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and the District of Columbia government should ensure the success of this program by expanding the number of children who can receive scholarships and protecting the integrity and freedom of participating private schools.

2. Take further steps to empower parents through choice. Congress should permit federal funds to supplement state funds for parental choice in education in states or localities where such programs have been enacted. The President's proposed \$100 America's Opportunity Scholarships for Kids initiative would provide federal grants to state and local organizations to provide private school scholarships to low-income children now trapped in persistently failing public schools.

3. Expand the limited parental choice options in No Child Left Behind. Congress and the Education Department should ensure that parents are aware of and have access to public school choice and supplemental tutoring services available to them under the No Child Left Behind Act. This will require reforming the law's existing public

school choice and after-school tutoring provisions to ensure real parental choice. Congress should also expand this range of options to include private school choice for students in underperforming public schools.

Facts and Figures

■ More parents are exercising choice today than in years past. The percentage of parents who sent their children to an assigned public school declined from 80 percent in 1993 to 76 percent in 1999.

■ Six states—Florida, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, Utah, and Wisconsin—and the District of Columbia now have state or district-funded scholarship programs for elementary and secondary students. Six states offer tax credits or deductions for education expenses or contributions to scholarship programs.

■ Forty states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school laws.

■ Fifteen states guarantee public school choice within or between districts. (Other states have choice programs that are optional for districts, target only specific populations, and/or require that parents pay tuition.) In all 50 states, home schooling is legal. As many as 2 million students are home schooled nationwide.

■ The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of parental choice in education. In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (June 27, 2002), the Court ruled that Cleveland, Ohio's voucher program, which includes religious schools, does not violate the Establishment Clause of the Constitution. In previous cases, the Court turned away a challenge to Arizona's scholarship tax credit program and ruled in favor of Minnesota's education tax deduction.

■ In a national survey of parents, the U.S. Department of Education's National Household Education Survey Program found that school choice increases parental satisfaction.

■ Parents whose children attended either public schools of their choice or private schools were more likely to say they were very satisfied with their children's schools, teachers, academic standards, and order and discipline than were parents whose children attended public assigned schools. Parents whose children attended private schools were more involved in activities at their children's schools than were parents whose children attended public assigned and public chosen schools.

Notes

■ The Manhattan Institute found that more than 90 percent of the parents of students in Florida’s McKay Scholarship program for special-needs students were satisfied with their child’s school and that “over 90 percent of parents who have left the program believe it should continue to be available to those who wish to use it.” Policymakers implementing a school voucher program should be confident that school choice will boost parental satisfaction.

■ A study conducted by researchers from Harvard and Georgetown Universities and the University of Wisconsin that was released in 2001 found that African-American students receiving private scholarships in Ohio, New York, and Washington, D.C., scored significantly higher than their public-school peers. Dozens of independent studies have found that school choice programs benefit the students who participate.

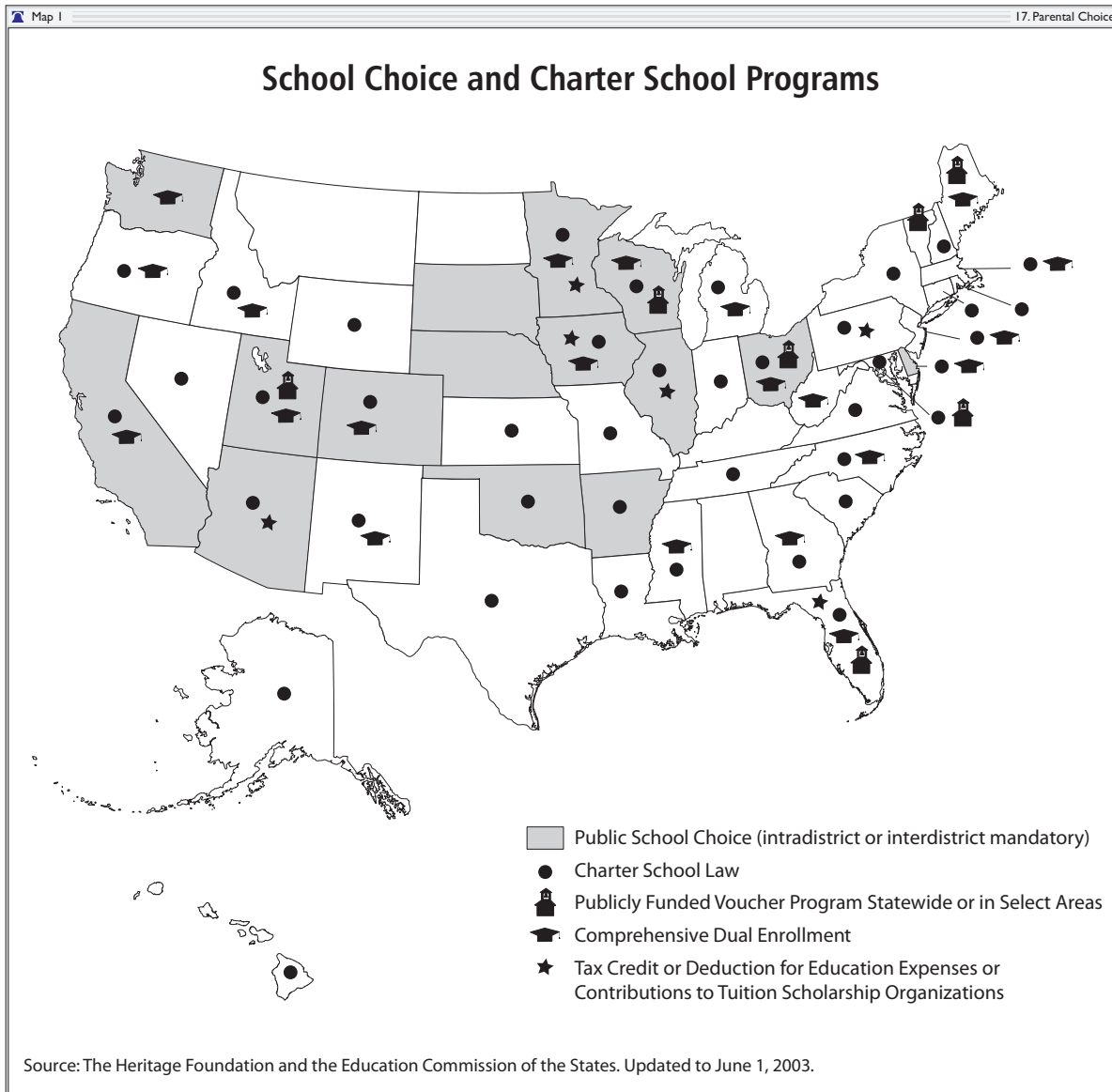
■ Manhattan Institute researcher Dr. Jay Greene found that 64 percent of low-income Milwaukee students using vouchers to enroll at 10 private high schools in 1999 graduated, whereas only 36 percent of their public-school peers received diplomas.

■ Harvard University economist Caroline Hoxby found that competition sparked improvement in threatened public schools in Arizona, Michigan, and Milwaukee and concluded: “If every school in the nation were to face a high level of competition both from other districts and from private schools, the productivity of America’s schools, in terms of students’ level of learning at a given level of spending, would be 28 percent higher than it is now.”

■ Manhattan Institute researcher Jay Greene found that Florida schools threatened with the risk of losing vouchers perform higher—on both Florida and national standardized examinations—than schools that do not face competition and that schools’ performance increased in direct proportion to the level of competition they faced from vouchers.

■ Because spending per student in public school is often higher than spending per student in a school choice program, allowing parents to choose their children’s schools could lead to significant cost efficiencies.

Notes



This chapter can be read online at issues2006.org/schoolchoice.

Additional Reading

“Education Notebook Archive,” bimonthly e-mail analysis, at www.heritage.org/Research/Education/EdNoteArchive.cfm.

Krista Kafer: “Choices in Education: 2005 Progress Report,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1848, April 25, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg1848.cfm.

Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D., “A Promising Start for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 710, April 6, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm710.cfm.