

## **Reclaiming Public Education: Enabling All Children to Learn**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a response to American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten's address to the 2013 TEACH Conference, who noted that the goal of a quality public education has never been fully realized, which some have used as an excuse to dismantle the entire public school system and replace it with choice options, charter schools, and vouchers. I agree that public education is under attack like never before from people whose brand of reform consists of privatizing and depersonalizing education. In this article, I examine four choice options: tuition tax credits, vouchers, charter schools, and education management organizations.

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In her address to the 2013 TEACH Conference, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten noted that the aspiration of a quality public education for every child has never been fully realized, which some have used as an excuse to dismantle the entire public school system and replace it with an array of choice options, charter schools, and vouchers (American Federation of Teachers, 2013a). I was so moved by her speech that I decided to respond and call on all education stakeholders throughout the country to reclaim the promise of public education and to fulfill our collective responsibility to help all children learn.

In a nationwide AFT poll of 1,000 teachers released in July (American Federation of Teachers, 2013b), support for quality public schools over expanding choice, charters, and vouchers is widespread with 77% of parents surveyed supporting public education; such support for public education cuts across political and class lines (American Federation of Teachers, 2013c). Let's examine some of the choice options designed to dismantle public education.

### **School Choice**

School choice has been introduced as a means of improving the effectiveness of public schools. The need for change attained national attention after the publication of reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which alleged that the American public school system was in a state of crisis. The Commission's report and others provided the impetus for the belief that market mechanisms such as various school choice plans will improve the effectiveness of schools through competition among schools for students; reduce inefficiencies in the administration and delivery of education; and have the effect of improved educational outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Goldhaber, 1999). From these beliefs emerge plans for tuition tax credits, vouchers, charter schools, and for-profit education

management organizations (EMOs).

Some policy makers and educators are intent on transforming the nation's public schools into a privatized school system. The problem is that the various privatized models are no more effective—and in many cases less effective—than the public schools they seek to replace (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). Opponents of school choice policies maintain that public school choice options have undermined the educational process for millions of children. Further, they challenge the widely held beliefs of school choice advocates that choice, by itself, improves school quality and efficiency, enhances opportunity for disadvantaged students, and encourages innovation through greater competition and administrative autonomy.

School choice options are in themselves no solution to the problems experienced by the current public school system. Like public schools, school choice options vary widely in quality and as a whole have not outperformed public schools. Four choice options will be reviewed: tuition tax credits, vouchers, charter schools, and education management organizations (EMOs).

### **Tuition Tax Credits**

In recent years, tuition tax credit proposals have been promoted at both the federal and state levels as a means of expanding school choice for parents. At the federal level, several tuition tax credit plans have been introduced in Congress over the past four decades. These proposals have differed on the following issues, the maximum credit amount and the portion of private school costs covered by the credit. Under a tuition tax credit policy, parents would subtract from their federal income tax bill a part of the amount that they paid in private school tuitions. Advocates argue that a system of tuition tax credits would improve the efficiency of education by placing greater reliance on market forces and promote equality of educational opportunity by increasing the access of low-income families to high-quality private education.

Opponents of tuition tax credits argue that such a policy would violate the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. They maintain that tax credits could result in increased racial and social class stratification. Tuition tax credit policies place limitations on the market model and regulations dealing with access. Children who lack the attributes that particular private school leaders feel contribute to the school's performance may find it difficult to gain acceptance to those schools. A central problem in the design of a tuition tax credit system is the trade-off between access and quality. Regulations that insure access undermine the quality of private schools by prescribing the composition of each school's clientele; regulations that protect the private school's capacity to control the composition of their student body undermine citizens' equality of access to those schools (Levy, 1986).

### **Vouchers**

Vouchers are another policy alternative that has been proposed to enhance school choice for parents. Under a simple voucher system, every family would receive for each school-age child a voucher that would have a specified dollar value when used to pay for educational services at either a public or private school.

The idea of vouchers was originally proposed by Milton Friedman (1962), the Nobel laureate in economics in the 1960s and later formalized in his best seller of 1980, *Free to Choose*. It is intended to create a competition market for schooling. John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990) provided the rationale for vouchers in their book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, arguing that choice (vouchers) alone could revitalize American public education. The evidence on voucher programs does not support the Chubb-Moe thesis (American Federation of Teachers, 2005, 2006; Fuller, 2011; Kahlenberg, 2008; National Education Association, 2006; Olson, 1996; Ravitch, 2010; Stern, 2008).

### **Charter Schools**

Charter Schools represent another school choice option. The term “charter” first appeared in the literature of school reform in *Education by Charter*, a book by educator Ray Budde (1988). He envisioned an educational system in which school districts would grant charter agreements to teachers who wished to create new curricula. These charters would add elements of efficiency, innovation, and competition to the public school system. Minnesota and California enacted the first charter school laws in 1991 and 1992, respectively. Since then, 40 states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school laws. In a report from the Center for Education Reform (2010) there are more than 5,400 charter schools operating across the United States, serving 1.7 million children.

Many proponents of charter schools see charters as vehicles to improve the academic achievement of poor minority students. However, results from research studies have shown that charter schools do not do better than their public school counterparts (American Federation of Teachers, 2002; Braun, Jenkins, & Gregg, 2006; CREDO, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Nelson, Rosenberg, & Van Meter, 2004; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Stutz, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Zimmer & Buddin, 2005; Zimmer et al., 2009).

### **Education Management Organizations**

Another school choice option is through a new development in educational governance and operations known as education management organizations (EMOs). Most EMOs run charter as well as traditional public schools. The rapid growth in the number of these private for-profit and nonprofit organizations since 1990 has coincided with the growth in the charter school movement (Levin, 2001).

Many charter schools operated by education management organizations use mechanisms to limit enrollment to certain students and make sure that only certain parents and community members have a voice in how the school is operated. These are typical issues in privatizing education. They impact the degree to which charter schools operate more like private than public schools (Levin, 2001).

There appears to be numerous examples of misleading claims being advanced by the for-profit K-12 industry: for-profit Edison Hernandez Academy in Dallas in 2001, for-profit Edison Charter Academy in San Francisco, for-profit Dayton Leadership Academies in Ohio in 2002, and for-profit Ingalls Edison Academy in Wichita, Kansas (Osborne, Russo, & Cattaro, 2012).

The false claims were that these for-profit charter schools were outperforming traditional public schools, which was not true.

### Conclusion

This article is a response to AFT President Randi Weingarten's address to the 2013 TEACH Conference, who noted that the goal of a quality public education has never been fully realized, which some have used as an excuse to dismantle the entire public school system and replace it with choice options, charter schools, and vouchers. I agree that public education is under attack like never before from people whose brand of reform consists of privatizing and depersonalizing education. In this article, I examined four choice options: tuition tax credits, vouchers, charter schools, and education management organizations.

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