

Nation's Charter Schools Lagging Behind, U.S. Test Scores Reveal  
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WASHINGTON, Aug. 16 - The first national comparison of test scores among children in charter schools and regular public schools shows charter school students often doing worse than comparable students in regular public schools.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/17/education/17charter.html?th>

School Choice: If It Quacks Like A Duck...  
By Ernie Whiteside  
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MONROE, Michigan, Aug. 17 - The buzzwords are "school choice"! It seems that everybody is in favor of school choice, but nobody is in favor of private education. Charter schools are the flagship of the school choice armada and the flagship is now flying its true colors. The first national comparison of test scores indicates that public charter schools do no better than traditional public schools. The motto on the flag of the charter school ship should read, "A Public School By Any Other Name Is Still A Public School"

The public education system in the United States is based on the 18th century Prussian school model for mass education. This model was designed to create model citizens and professional soldiers who would be obedient, well-behaved, unquestioning of authority and who would share similar opinions on issues of national importance. While most Americans were interested in making education available to every class of society, others were working to destroy free market alternatives.

Prior to the invention of the public school system, Americans had real choice! If you wished to educate your child, you could buy books and teach them at home, or go to the local libraries that were provided for in nearly every township. You could hire a tutor to help with the more difficult tasks. You could send your child to a parochial school, often at little or no charge. Or, you could send your child to one of the private schools, some were quite expensive but others were heavily subsidized by philanthropic benefactors.

Admittedly, your choice may have been somewhat limited by economic issues in wilderness or unsettled areas. There may not have been a parochial school or a library nearby. Many of the private teachers taught small classes in their homes and there may not have been an "academy", as they were then called, in your community. The same limitations applied to an even more basic commodity, food. Oranges were hard to come by in Michigan and in hard times you might find yourself eating muskrat instead of venison while the wealthier class ate beef and chicken. Your family might have eaten biscuits and water while a neighbor ate cakes and tea. There was no popular movement to create a public food distribution system; people enjoyed being free!

Today, the same free market that offered our ancestors very few choices in food, offers most Americans an incredible choice of foods that would have been considered delicacies two hundred years ago. But just the opposite exists where education is concerned. A public school, is a public school, is a public school! We might dress it up as a charter school and tell the public that now they have a choice, but if it quacks like a duck, it's a duck! Many school choice proponents are crying out for other inventive programs like vouchers and tax credits. To qualify for these programs, every school that accepts the voucher and every parent that accepts the credit will have to make sure that the student is being educated the same way public school students are educated. These programs would eventually extend the regulatory arm of school boards into every private and parochial school and into every home school and would inhibit innovation while driving up costs.

Our incredible choice of foods is the result a free market in which the consumer buys the product of their own choosing, from the vendor of their own choosing, with money from their own pocket. Our choices in education will not be expanded any differently.

The armada of ships that make up our public school system are all taking on water fast. School districts everywhere have taxed their citizens to the limits of the law and are floating bonds in a creative effort to get more money. In addition to this, public education makes up about 40% of the Michigan state budget. The folks that are jumping off the boats that represent traditional public schools and into boats representing public school choice are just jumping from one sinking ship into another.

The answer is to promote education alternatives that are free of government entanglement. To promote a free market education model, we must NOT fund it with tax dollars, we must NOT tax it, we must NOT regulate it, we must let it grow organically. Our private and parochial schools and our home schools must be free of every form of state interference that might discourage their growth, affordability and innovation.

On the other side of the coin, we must let the public school system diminish. The state must stop treating free market education choices as competitors and must accept a smaller role for the public education system. The fly in the ointment is this, public schools fund 100% of their activity with debt. The money to run the schools is borrowed and spent today and then paid back in the future by the taxpayer. Some money is held in funds that are drawn over time but these funds won't meet the future needs unless the cost of education drops sharply or other revenue sources are found. A public school system with fewer students and less programs won't cost less in the future, in fact because of long-term fixed costs, it will initially cost more per student.

If our goal were to let the free market provide an education for most children and then provide a public school system for the remaining children, we would approach the problem quite differently! We must unwind the clock of history and discover where the mistakes were made and unmake them. Every successful business endeavor must critically examine its historical and current business practices, public education is no different. We must know what the true mission of the enterprise is!

An article from the Northwest Ordinance (1787) survives in our modern constitution and must be the foundation for the mission of our current public education system:

*"Religion, morality and knowledge, being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."*

The "schools and means of education" in 1787 were private, parochial and home schools. The free market of education must be encouraged and the public school system must NOT be the means whereby these school and means of educational are destroyed and replaced by a mass education system designed to create model citizens and professional soldiers who will be obedient, well-behaved, unquestioning of authority and who will share similar opinions on issues of national importance. Only a free market for education can provide the innovative and cost effective choices for education that the a free people demand.

*Ernest A. Whiteside is a 2004 Libertarian candidate for Michigan State Board of Education. He opposes most school choice initiatives, such as vouchers and tax credits, because they extend the regulatory reach of the state. He supports limiting laws, regulations and the oversight of the State Board of Education to public schools only. He supports tax subsidized, basic, quality, public schools for those who cannot afford an education until the free market makes them unnecessary.*

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