

THE SUCCESS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

The high costs of failing public schools are well known and highly documented (1). In Georgia, for example, high school dropouts cost the state almost \$2 billion in 2015. To solve these problems, many cities and states are experimenting with innovative educational models. School choice programs—such as charter schools, vouchers, and virtual schools—have produced dramatic results, improving performance and providing a better education for students. By examining the three examples below, we can see that using free-market principles in education reform works.

CHARTER SCHOOLS & THE HARLEM SUCCESS ACADEMY

Charter schools are an alternative to traditional public schools. They receive public money but are not subject to all of the rules and regulations of other public schools, including the counterproductive demands of public school teachers unions. Charters are typically smaller, offer customized curriculum, and have a more rigorous educational atmosphere. Unlike private school alternatives, they do not charge tuition. New York City student is eligible to enroll, but the school gets far more

The Harlem Success Academy (HAS) opened its doors in 2006. Any New York City student is eligible to enroll, but the school gets far more applicants than it has space for, so officials must fill the school's seats through a random lottery. As seen in the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, many student hopefuls are (tragically) denied admittance as a result. One innovation that has proved successful at HSA: the school has longer school days and more school days per year than traditional public schools.

The results have been stunning. In 2009, third-grade students admitted to HSA were compared to others who applied but were not selected through the lottery. The results are displayed in the table below. Ninety-five percent of HAS students passed the English language arts exam, versus just 72 percent of those not selected. 100 percent passed the mathematics portion of the exam, with 70 percent earning the highest rating. For those who were not selected, just 85 percent passed in math and only 17 percent earned the highest rating (2). These combined results ranked Harlem Success Academy 32nd out of New York's 3,500 public schools and the highest public school on the math section (3). Success Charter Network hopes to add 40 additional schools over the next ten years and expand its success elsewhere.

SCHOOL VOUCHERS & MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Some state and local governments offer vouchers or special tax credits to help parents pay for tuition at a private school instead of enrolling their children in the local public school. Giving parents more resources to choose the best option for their children's education has improved outcomes for these children, but it also has improved the quality of the public schools that now must compete for students or be left behind.

QUICK FACTS

- Seventy percent of Harlem Success Academy students earned top scores in math, compared to only 17 percent of those that weren't selected.
- The Florida Virtual School teaches more than 122,000 students annually with students in every county in the state.

NOTABLE & QUOTABLE

"It is only the tyranny of the status quo that leads us to take it for granted that in schooling, government monopoly is the best way for the government to achieve its objective."

- **Milton and Rose Friedman**

Established in 1990, the Milwaukee Public School voucher program gives more than 20,000 students the ability to attend private schools by providing up to \$6,442 in funding to be used at any participating school. Families with a household income below 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (currently \$67,000 for a family of four) are eligible.

Instead of a government monopoly in primary and secondary education, parents need more choice and flexibility to find the best path for their children.

Research shows that not only have participants in the program fared better, but public schools that are more exposed to voucher competition have produced large performance gains in reading, language arts, science, and social studies (4). Milwaukee's voucher success spawned similar programs in Cleveland, Utah, Indiana, and others.

VIRTUAL SCHOOLS IN FLORIDA

As part of broader reforms in the state of Florida, the Florida Virtual School was established in 1997 as the country's first Internet-based high school. It has since grown to over 122,000 full-time students in grade K-12, and now offers part-time enrollment to allow students to supplement traditional schooling (5). As part of its unique structure, the Florida Virtual School's funding is tied to student performance. The school receives a portion of its funding upfront, but the majority is paid only after the student successfully completes a course. Florida Virtual High School students outperform their counterparts both on standardized test scores and grades in core courses. Additionally, the virtual school gives students access to a larger curriculum at a pace that best matches the students' needs.

CONCLUSION

Government spending on public education has skyrocketed since the 1970s, but students' educational performance has largely remained flat. Many of our children are leaving high school without the preparation they need to make it in an increasingly competitive, globalized economy. The reason: short-sighted progressives and special interests like teachers unions have fought tooth and nail to maintain the federal government's inefficient public school monopoly (6). Parents need more choice and flexibility to find the best path for their children's education. Innovative school choice programs like those in Harlem, Milwaukee, and Florida should be embraced going forward.

Endnotes:

1. Americans for Prosperity Foundation, (September 2011) (online at http://www.americansforprosperityfoundation.com/files/failing_public_schools.pdf).
2. Jonathan Supovitz and Sam Rikoon, Early Achievement Impacts of the Harlem Success Academy Charter School in New York City (April 2010) (online at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pdf/fac/SupovitzHSA.pdf>).
3. Michael Wille, Why you Should Buy into the Lottery, HERITAGE FOUNDATION (July 14, 2010) (online at <http://blog.heritage.org/2010/07/14/why-you-should-buy-into-the-lottery/>).
4. Greg Forster, A Win- Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Vouchers, THE FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION CHOICE (March 2011) (online at <http://www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/656/A-win-win-solution---the-empirical-evidence-on-school-vouchers.pdf>).
5. Florida Virtual School, Quick Facts (online at <http://www.flvs.net/areas/aboutus/pages/quickfactsaboutflvs.aspx>)(accessed December 21, 2011).
6. Andrew J. Coulson, From Russia With Butter, THE CATO INSTITUTE, Cato @ Liberty Blog (December 13, 2011) (online at <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/from-russia-with-butter/>).

Americans for Prosperity Foundation's "Need to Know" informational series explores current events and recent scholarship on public policy issues from a free-market economics perspective. A full list of "Need to Know" briefings is available at www.AmericansForProsperityFoundation.org/NeetToKnow.
©2012 Americans for Prosperity Foundation. All Rights Reserved.