

A comprehensive response to common errors in the education debate

Setting the Record Straight on School Choice

In the past few decades, school choice has gone from a theory on the outer edges of policy debate to one of the primary disputes in modern education policy in the United States. Legislators around the country have increasingly turned to the ideas of choice and private education as solutions to the stagnant and ineffective system of monopoly public schools run directly by the government. But this change has not been without controversy, and opponents of school choice are increasingly vocal.

In *School Choice Myths: Setting the Record Straight on Education Freedom*, editors Corey A. DeAngelis, Cato adjunct scholar and director of school choice at the Reason Foundation, and Neal P. McCluskey, director of Cato's Center for Education Freedom, present a collection of essays responding to 12 of the most common, and erroneous, criticisms of school choice.

Most criticisms of school choice focus on allegedly negative consequences for the students or, more often, for the status quo public schools. Funding concerns play a prominent role, with private educational options denounced for "taking" money out of the public school system. But this is not how reality has played out, as explained by Ben Scafidi and Marty Leuken in one chapter. First, funding following the individual student doesn't leave students or their families worse off, and that's what should really matter. But also, the way most school choice programs have been structured, only a portion of the per-pupil public school funding is allocated to follow the student to a different school. Rather than catastrophically defunding public schools, this actually leaves them with higher per-pupil funding.

What about equality? Will unrestrained competition lead to some students prospering while others are consigned to fail-

ing institutions? This sorting concern seems plausible, particularly for those with a dim view of parents' ability to consistently make wise and informed choices. But the reality is that competition improves outcomes across the board, including for those remaining in public schools.

One particularly misguided criticism equates the movement for public choice with crypto-racism and the segregationist politics of the civil rights era. In his contribution, historian Phillip W. Magness dismantles this claim, which he asserts is built on intentional misreading of the evidence and flawed historical methodology. And, of course, segregation was itself a policy of public schools, enacted by state law and entrenched by their monopoly.

Other chapters address concerns about special needs students, economic inequality, the supposed need for public schools to inculcate civic republicanism, and claims that education is a good uniquely unsuited for free markets.

These arguments have been promoted by a variety of interests, but none more vociferously than by the unions representing public school teachers, which exercise considerable influence on state and local politics. Through this self-dealing symbiosis, policies have often revolved around restricting employee discipline and pushing fiscally unsustainable salary and benefit

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policies. Education policy becomes an interaction between politicians and the unions who avidly support their reelection.

School choice offers the alternative of putting parents back in the driver's seat. It's no surprise, then, that entrenched special interests have fought back hard against the growing spread of school choice programs. *School Choice Myths* offers a go-to guide for rebutting their claims and defending the value of educational freedom. ■

SCHOOL CHOICE MYTHS: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON EDUCATION FREEDOM IS AVAILABLE AT CATO.ORG/BOOKS AND THROUGH BOOKSELLERS AND ONLINE RETAILERS NATIONWIDE.