

The Alternate Reality of School Choice Proponents

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School choice proponents live in an alternate reality where facts are malleable and the truth belongs to those who shout the most often. The physical world has immutable facts that govern over specific circumstances. The facts on public schools are not in dispute.

Reality #1: School choice in Indiana undermines public school funding and diminishes the value provided taxpayers. Choice vouchers and Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) draw from a common tuition support allocation with public schools in Indiana. Any funds diverted to vouchers and ESAs reduce the funds for public schools. Pending legislation extends eligibility for these dollar-draining programs to Hoosier families making three times the free and reduced lunch amount values. This diversion of funds is unquestionably not keeping the concept of a free, quality education for all citizens within our state strong for the future.

Reality #2: School choice leads to academic underperformance compared to public schools. A recent deep dive study of data from Indiana's choice program by Waddington & Berends (2018; doi:10.1002/pam.22086) conclusively demonstrates that although there is no appreciable difference in English Language Arts scores between public school and voucher children, voucher children suffer from deficient math scores that remain persistently lower for years. Jobs of the future require math, and these children will be placed at a distinct disadvantage.

Reality #3: School choice programs do not face the same accountability provisions that public schools do. While some large-scale testing is performed for all school age students, private schools do not face the same reporting provisions as public schools. Private educational systems do not submit to the same level of student progress review, and they are not held to the same standards when selecting curricular materials or hiring teachers.

Reality #4: Choice programs allow the school to determine who is admitted. While proponents insist that vouchers increase opportunity, in reality, private schools may cherry-pick students and discriminate in who they enroll. Religious schools, in particular, are exempt from numerous federal regulations protecting students from discrimination on the basis of sex or disability. Public schools take all children, regardless of background or ability.

Reality #5: Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) have significant potential to cheat children. Arizona, the state which pioneered the ESA concept, has documented hundreds of thousands of dollars in fraudulent spending within the ESA system. The proposal under consideration in Indiana provides minimal resources to monitor such accounts. Children are the ultimate victims when monies intended for their education are spent elsewhere.