

What Kids Deserve

Tony Payton, Jr. 04 April 2011

As the debate rages between adults about vouchers as an educational option for students, it is important to keep in mind what our kids deserve in a learning environment: a nurturing surrounding where they feel inspired to learn and compelled to achieve; safety and comfort; state-of-the-art learning facilities—every option and opportunity to succeed. Vouchers and other options for school choice provide this opportunity. The opportunity scholarship program as proposed in Pennsylvania Senate Bill 1 would help us achieve the goal of an ideal school environment for all students. Senate Bill 1 will allow low income students in failing schools an opportunity scholarship to attend a school of their choice.

Opportunity scholarships will not ruin the public schools, as some critics contend. While studies are relatively scarce, the early opinion of researchers is that vouchers have done little, if any, harm to student achievement in public schools and in some cases have spurred improvements in standardized exam scores in public schools (Lu 2010).

- In Florida, where vouchers have been implemented as an option (Chakrabarti 2004), there has been measurable, if slight, improvement in test scores.
- Vouchers have no negative effect on achievement,

according to Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas (Wolf 2008)

- According to John Witte, Wisconsin's "official evaluator" of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the nation's first educational voucher program, there is little evidence that the highest-achieving students left public schools even when provided with a voucher opportunity (Witte 2000)—countering a fear often cited by opponents of voucher programs.

A voucher program is not a guarantor of student success on its own, but it does provide the opportunity for a different environment in which students can achieve.

The structure and makeup of a voucher program greatly determines the effect and outcome. In determining during the legislative process what the final version of the opportunity scholarships in Senate Bill 1 will look like, it will be important to ensure a data-driven process so that we design the best program possible to attain the original goal of student achievement .

We can all agree that compelling kids to stay in failing public schools is not a solution. Parents are often forced to send their children to neighborhood schools with horrible academic and safety track records. Parents and students, teachers and administrators are all frustrated by this situation. Their dissatisfaction has led to a culture of disengagement that exacerbates the problem of student

and school underachievement.

Keeping students in poor-performing and even dangerous schools is an intolerable situation. While vouchers will not solve every problem within our system of education, they offer the choice and freedom that parents and students deserve.

State Representative Tony Payton (PA 179th–D) represents parts of North and Northeast Philadelphia. He is the co-sponsor of legislation that would create Reliable Educational Assistance for College Hopefuls, or REACH, a statewide merit-based scholarship program for all students in Pennsylvania who maintain at least a 3.0 grade-point average and a 90 percent attendance record. www.pahouse.com/payton

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