



# VIEWPOINT

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## Teacher Freedom: A Result of School Choice?

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### Summary

The battle for democratic schools where teachers and students/parents relate on a mutually acceptable basis, which a professional system permits, is progressing. When such a system finally exists, teachers will wonder why it took so long, and why didn't they attempt to bring it about earlier.

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Many teachers regard themselves as professionals and conduct themselves accordingly. But only when they are paid through the students, and work with them and parents on a mutually acceptable basis, as doctors do with their patients, will they be professionals rather than just public employees.

How much a teacher should be paid is a matter of personal opinion. But it is an objective fact that teacher salaries and fringe benefits as a percentage of the total expense for the public schools has been going down for decades. In the 1960s, for example, teacher costs were almost 60% of the total bill. Today, they are closer to 40%.

Nationally, average teacher salary and benefits now approximate \$70,000, while average spending per pupil is about \$10,000. That's \$160,000 for the national average of 16 pupils per teacher. (The \$10,000 average is misleading since per pupil spending ranges from about \$6,000 to more than \$45,000 in individual school districts.) Note that pupils-per-teacher is always less than average class size, since not all teachers teach every period of every day.

Where is the other \$90,000 going?



Despite union rhetoric, surveys consistently find that significant numbers of public school teachers support school choice.

One answer is provided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has reported the proportion of teachers in the United States to the total school staff is lower than in any other country. Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, said that New York state has more public school administrators than all the nations of western Europe combined.

So let's suppose an \$8,000 voucher, or scholarship, accompanied each student. Suppose further, that a half-dozen teachers got together and started a school, just as doctors form a clinic, or lawyers a partnership. With 16 students each, the six teachers would have about 100 students, and an annual school budget of \$800,000.

Could they have a successful school for that amount of money?

Could they still pay themselves \$70,000 in salaries and benefits, costing \$420,000, leaving \$380,000 for other costs? Would they need to pay union dues of \$500-600 a year for representation? They apparently think not since few charter school teachers are unionized.

Teachers aren't true professionals, aren't paid better, and have trouble with students and parents because they insist on maintaining their status as hired hands. They are told who, what, when, where and how to teach.

Surveys of teachers in nonpublic schools, and public charter schools, consistently find they are happier, even if paid less, than teachers in traditional schools. These schools also have less violence, fewer disruptive students and very few strikes.

The reason? Unlike traditional public schools, everyone in schools of choice are there voluntarily. Given options, few teachers or students/parents will choose a school with which they are unhappy.

Experience has shown that parents don't want to run the schools, any more than they want to run hospitals or the court system. Just as they accept doctors determining medical practice, or lawyers establishing how they will practice law, and they accept a variety of nonpublic schools, from all of which they can choose, they would accept teacher-designed and operated schools as long as they can select those that they prefer.

Families sometimes cause problems within the traditional system because that is their only option. Unable to afford a compatible school they must try to change the one they are compelled to use. Teachers often do the same thing. The result? Teacher/parent antagonisms caused by a system which doesn't permit options.

The battle for democratic schools where teachers and students/parents relate on a mutually acceptable basis, which a professional system permits, is progressing. When such a system finally exists, teachers will wonder why it took so long, and why didn't they attempt to bring it about earlier.

Surveys consistently show that significant numbers of public school teachers support school choice, despite union positions and rhetoric. Unfortunately most of them are afraid to say so publicly because of pressure and condemnation from their unions if they do, another price they pay for maintaining the present system.

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*(David W. Kirkpatrick is a Senior Education Fellow with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information is available at [www.buckeyeinstitute.org](http://www.buckeyeinstitute.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.*

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