



VIEWPOINT

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Who's Cheating Whom?

By: Matthew Carr

Summary

Some parents have figured out that if they enroll their child in a failing school for the last few days of the school year, they can get a voucher to send their child back to their private school next year. Rather than deny these parents a voucher, we should allow students currently enrolled in private schools to be immediately eligible for a voucher, contingent on meeting a means test.

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It turns out that the new EdChoice voucher program in Ohio contains a “loophole.” An unknown number of parents have figured out that if they enroll their child in a failing school for the last few days of the school year, they can get a voucher to send their child back to their private school next year. This time with a little financial help.

When word of these parents’ actions broke, seemingly everyone denounced them. But this rush to judgment, condemning parents looking for help in paying their private school tuition bills, is rife with hypocrisy and false assumptions.

The inconvenient truth is that wealthy parents have, by and large, already availed themselves of the oldest known form of school choice; moving to a suburb. These urban parents sending their children to private schools are likely neither affluent nor undeserving of a school voucher.

They are parents who took the initiative to get their children out of their chronically failing schools before the state legislature got around to doing something about the problem. And now policymakers want to punish these parents for taking the initiative back when the state would not.

These are parents who have chosen to sacrifice what little discretionary income they might earn in an effort to provide a quality education for their children when the public schools they lived near could not.

These parents aren’t cheating the system. The system has cheated them out of a quality education for their children for years, with no viable escape. Those who have gotten out deserve a voucher just as much as those who have not yet.

So here’s a simple solution that will ensure that those who truly need a voucher get one, while also keeping any potential wealthy freeloaders out of the program.

Allow students currently enrolled in private schools to be immediately eligible for a voucher, but require them to be means tested. Those students whose parent(s) are at or below 200% of the poverty line should be allowed a voucher.

The Percentage of Students in Ohio’s Big Eight School Districts Not Proficient in Math and Reading 2005-2006

City	% Not Proficient in Reading	% Not Proficient in Math
Akron	33.7	34.0
Canton	35.5	44.3
Cincinnati	46.0	50.0
Cleveland	50.2	54.2
Columbus	45.4	49.1
Dayton	56.0	57.7
Toledo	37.7	40.6
Youngstown	47.7	36.0

Source: The Ohio Department of Education

There are two choices really: The first is that we can use this voucher program as a means to both allow children to escape failing schools and slow the exodus of people and their tax dollars out of these urban areas; or we can continue our current policy of demanding that those who are currently in private schools be required to have attended a failing public school for at least one year before being eligible for a voucher.

We would all be well advised to remember the purpose of any voucher program. They are created in response to the chronic failure of our urban schools to provide a quality education to those who arguably need it the most. One consequence of these programs is that they also slow the emptying out of these cities by providing parents with a reason to stay.

In case there were any doubts left about the magnitude and persistence of that failure, the table provided shows that, according to the preliminary achievement test results for 2005-2006, in our big eight school districts roughly 44% of students were not proficient in reading and close to 46% of students were not proficient in math.

Rather than pointing fingers, we ought to be focusing on the single most important factor that will determine Ohio's ability to compete in the global economy: our ability to create a highly educated workforce. If we're going to insist on chasing distractions like the EdChoice "loophole," we might as well get used to being the best state that people can't wait to leave.

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