

## **Busting Four Myths to Indiana's School Choice Legislation**

### **Introduction**

In 2011 the Indiana state legislature approved the largest voucher/school choice program in the United States. To sell the idea to the general public, some politicians said the program would save taxpayers money, improve public education through a free-market model of school choice for parents, and would give parents a choice of where to send their children to school.

Many public school leaders responded by saying if a so-called "school choice" program is introduced in the public education sector, it must not increase the division between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Any competition between public and private/parochial schools must occur on a level playing field; private/parochial schools should adhere to the same requirements as public schools; and private/parochial schools must accept any child who wants to attend (i.e., not screen out high risk students).

Many questions were left unanswered by Indiana politicians when they implemented Indiana's school voucher, a.k.a. student scholarship program. Those questions include:

- A. How will a system of private/parochial schools, paid by Indiana taxpayers, do a better job of ensuring all children will have equal access to educational opportunity than the current system of public education?
- B. What methods and techniques of instruction are used in private/parochial schools that are better than those used in public schools? If those exist, what are the barriers to extending them to public schools?
- C. What laws, rules, and regulations are private/parochial schools exempted from that permit them to be more effective or efficient? What barriers exist to extending those exemptions to public schools?
- D. What are the fiscal implications?

So what has been the result of the Indiana's School Choice legislation? With now a call from legislators to expand this legislation, it is time to look at the last four years to determine whether or not the rhetoric used by Indiana politicians to sell this legislation to the general public is true.

### **Myth #1: Indiana's school choice program will save taxpayers money.**

The premise behind this statement is that by giving parents a student scholarship of up to \$4,500 per child, the state will save money by not having to pay public schools for these students. In 2011, when the voucher program was introduced, approximately 3,919 families received a student voucher so their children could attend a private/parochial school. According to an Associated Press report, this saved taxpayers approximately \$4 million dollars.

Today, the number of vouchers currently being used by parents to send their children to private/parochial schools is approximately 20,000. According to a report by WFIU/WTIU news reporter Claire McNerny, the voucher program is now costing taxpayers approximately \$16 million a year. If Indiana legislators expand the number of vouchers available to parents, it will inevitably increase the cost for Indiana taxpayers to fund Indiana's school choice program. The question is where will the money come from to expand this already costly experiment?

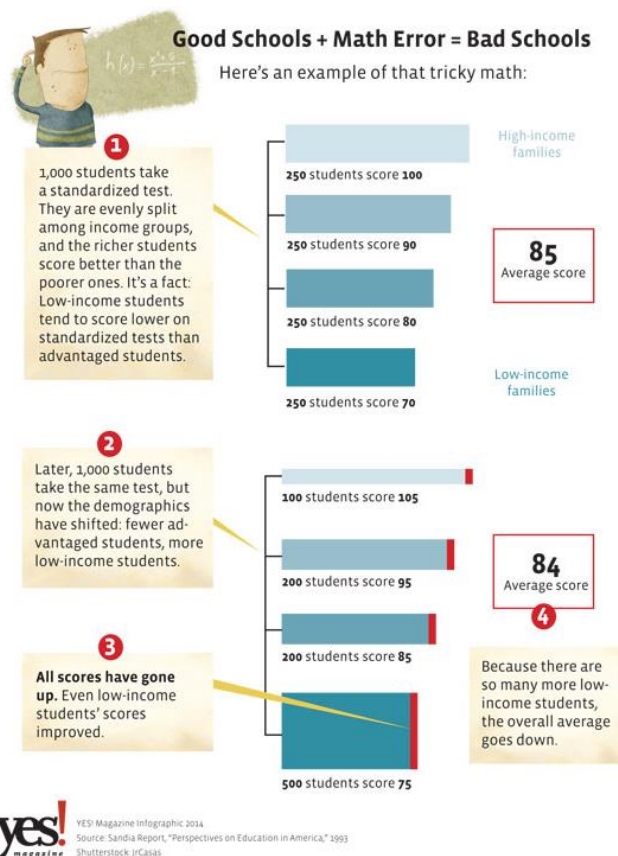
### **Myth #2: Indiana's school choice legislation will improve Indiana public schools.**

Some believe that a free-market model of competition, like that used in the U.S. economy, will help improve the outcomes of public education. Much of the rhetoric used by Indiana politicians and

special interest groups is that public schools are failing and parents need an alternative.

First, one needs to consider what data, if any, exists that supports the notion that public schools are failing. Michael Roach and Peter Kloosterman studied the “National Report Card” for public schools to determine how Indiana public schools are doing compared with the other 49 states. Also known as the National Assessment of Education Progress, Roach and Kloosterman’s analysis of this longitudinal assessment concluded “Indiana has a history of doing reasonably well on national and international assessments.” The authors’ research also found that “Indiana students outperformed the nation on average in grades 4 and 8 in mathematics, and also had the highest or second highest average scale scores for 2000, 2003, and 2005 when compared to neighboring states.”

Dean Paton, writer for *Yes! Magazine*, examined public school reform over the past 34 years. His findings conclude that, “in the rush to privatize the country’s schools, corporations and politicians have decimated school budgets, replaced teaching with standardized testing, and placed the blame on teachers and students.” He goes on to show that although test scores and graduation rates have continued to rise over the past 30 years, the push for privatizing public schools has created a propaganda machine to convince the general public that public schools are failing. Below is a chart from Paton’s article showing how politicians and corporations use “tricky math” to influence this belief:



The National Center for Education Statistics tracks U.S. public education data. From 1995 to 2012, the graduation rate for students attending U.S. public schools has consistently increased. In 1995, the overall graduation rate is listed at 71%. In 2012, the overall graduation rate is listed at 81%. Broken down by ethnicity, graduation gains are occurring for most minorities as well.

Second, one needs to look at the “best education systems in the world” to see how other countries turned around their respective education systems. Dr. Marc Tucker, President and CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy, is recognized as an international expert on education reform. Recently, Dr. Tucker was interviewed for the education documentary “Rise Above the Mark.” In his interview he says the following regarding the “school choice” model that is being implemented throughout the U.S.:

You can be for choice as I am by the way because you think its right for students and parents and teachers to have choices; but you have an awfully hard time being for choice because you believe it improves the performance of the schools, the system or the students. There is no evidence for that. There is not only no evidence for that in the United States, there is no evidence for that anywhere in the world. I defy you to point to a top-performing country that got that way by introducing choice systems.

### **Myth #3: Private/Charter schools get better results than public schools.**

With more Indiana tax dollars flowing to private/charter schools, taxpayers should question whether or not private/charter schools get better results than public schools. Benjamin Wood, reporter for the *Deseret News*, reviewed a study completed by the Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes regarding the academic results of charter schools vs. public schools. The study looked at 26 states to determine if charter schools were producing better results. Wood states the following:

In the 26 states that participated in the study, which together account for 95 percent of the nation's charter school students, researchers again found that most charter schools are performing no better, if not worse, than their traditional school counterparts in reading and mathematics, based on standardized tests.

Dr. Dianne Ravitch, education historian and a research professor at New York University, has studied charter schools for over 20 years. As assistant secretary of education under former President George H.W. Bush, she helped start the charter school movement because she thought it would greatly assist disadvantaged students. Now, she is opposed to charter schools. In a guest column she wrote and that was published in various newspapers across the U.S. including the *Washington Post*, she states,

Numerous national and state studies have shown that charters on average don’t get better results than regular public schools. A small percentage get high scores, more get very low scores, most are about average in terms of test scores. Why kill off a community’s public school to replace it with a privately managed school that is no better and possibly worse?

She goes on to say that many of the charter schools that show better results than public schools are “skimming” the best students from public schools and kicking out the low performing students. In her book, *Reign of Error*, she writes that if legislators want charter schools to work for all students, they need to ensure that charter schools are not-for-profit, are managed by local educators, and only enroll a significant portion of students who are not succeeding in public schools.

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, Professor of Education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, has authored more than a dozen books and 300 articles on education practices and policies. She too was interviewed for “Rise Above the Mark.” In her interview she cites some of her research

regarding the results of charter schools vs. public schools:

The charter school reform is not a panacea; it is not magic, and there are a lot of charter schools that are performing much less well than district run public schools. In fact, the largest study of charter schools found that charter schools were about twice as likely to underperform public schools serving the same population as they were to outperform those schools.

**Myth #4: Private/Charter schools that receive Indiana tax dollars follow the same rules as public schools.**

Indiana public schools are required to advertise their respective local budgets in local newspapers and hold two public hearings to give patrons a chance to address their local School Board about the advertised budgets. Then, in a public meeting, the School Board must approve the budget, which is mostly funded by taxpayer dollars. Private/charter schools receiving taxpayer dollars do not have to follow this requirement. Therefore, taxpayers can be kept in the dark about how their tax money is being spent by these institutions.

Karen Francisco, editorial page editor for the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, relays a story in her “Rise Above the Mark” interview about a conversation she had with the superintendent of the archdiocese Catholic schools. She says that as his parochial schools were “gearing up” to begin accepting vouchers, she asked him if he expected “allowing voucher students among the Burmese and Somali refugees relocated to [their] city by Catholic charities. And he very quickly said ‘no, they wouldn’t be comfortable here.’” She explains that the Catholic schools in her area, as stated by the superintendent, were “so eager to accept voucher students; argued they provide a better education than the public schools; but the refugee students can stay with the public schools, and we do not have any interest in serving them.”

This is not only true in Indiana, but it is true throughout the U.S. For example, private/charter school administrators can create requirements for admittance into their schools. Public schools are required to take all children who live within the school district boundaries. Also, one way private/charter schools can remove students is through a simplified expulsion process. In a study of Chicago schools compiled by *Chicago Tribune* reporters Noreen Ahmed-Ulah and Alex Richards, that datum showed that charter schools expelled 61 students for every 10,000 student enrolled compared to Chicago district run schools that expel five students for every 10,000 students. In Nashville, Laura Clawson, reporter for the *Daily Kos Labor*, reports that prior to the implementation of the state’s standardized testing, the “eight schools with the highest net loss of students are all charter schools.” According to *Washington Post* reporter Emma Brown, the D.C. charter schools expelled 676 students over a three-year period compared to just 24 students over a three-year period for the D.C. public schools.

**Summary**

Over the next few months, Indiana legislators will debate expanding Indiana’s school choice legislation by removing the cap on the number of parents who can apply for a voucher to send their children to a private/parochial school using taxpayer money. Several questions need to be answered before proceeding down this path: 1) How do legislators plan to pay for this increase, and 2) Will public school funding decrease again because of this expansion?

Before expanding Indiana’s school choice expenditures, Indiana legislators should gather data to determine if this two-system model of education is working to provide ALL Indiana students with a world-class education. As briefly presented here, there is no evidence anywhere in the world that offering a two-system model of education – a voucher for any parent wanting to send their child to

a private/parochial school and a public school system for all other children – will create a better education system.

Indiana legislators need to consider the work of Dr. Edward Deming. Dr. Deming, an American engineer and statistician who helped turn around the struggling Japanese auto industry, using a systemic approach to improving quality, indicates that implementing a system where one part of a system wins at the expense of another part of a system will ultimately fail. Case in point: In 2013 Indiana legislators forgave \$91.2 million in loans to charter schools. The money was borrowed from Indiana's Common School Fund, which many public schools also utilize. Carmen McCollum, reporter for the *Northwest Indiana Times*, in reporting this story, interviewed Stacey Schmidt, superintendent of Porter Township School Corporation. Superintendent Schmidt is quoted saying, "if we want to be fair and equitable, the same standard should be applied to all schools, so the loans should be forgiven for everyone, . . .Charter schools are being given some advantages that traditional public schools are not given."

From the 2014 Indiana Department of Education's calculation of letter grades for public, private and parochial schools that are receiving taxpayer money, nearly half of the 76 charter schools are failing or doing poorly according to a story by Sandra Chapman, WTHR investigative reporter. She quotes an "insider" at the Indiana Math and Science Academy West charter school as saying "Nothing is taught...nothing is learned with unlicensed teachers."

To further accentuate the problems that exist with a two-system approach of education where one part of the system is winning at the expense of the other, taxpayers should consider the recent grade change made by the former Indiana State Superintendent Tony Bennett's staff for Christel House Academy charter school as reported by Tom LoBianco, reporter for the *Associated Press*. Also, as reported by Stephanie Wang, reporter for the *Indianapolis Star*, taxpayers should pay attention to the Indiana State Board of Education's decision to again raise Christel House Academy's grade at its meeting on October 15, 2014.

All signs point to an unfair, two-system approach to educating Indiana students where one system, Indiana's student choice system, is being favored by Indiana legislators at the expense of Indiana's public school system. If Indiana legislators are really interested in providing a world-class education system for all Indiana students, then they should study the current two-system model to determine if their scheme is really working. From this viewpoint, the data suggests that this two-system approach is a very costly program with very little, if any, benefit. With just the recent news as reported by Stephanie Wang that parochial and private schools were overpaid for vouchers and had to return \$4 million dollars, another question must be answered: Who is accountable for Indiana's school choice legislation? Hopefully, voters will begin paying attention and use their vote to hold accountable those making the decisions for this unfair, two-system scheme of education.

Instead of throwing more money at this unproven two-system approach, Indiana legislators should use Indiana's resources on proven strategies that will improve public education including early childhood education, reducing class size, investing in professional development for educators, and assisting students who live in poverty. These are the strategies the best education systems in the world have implemented to become the best.

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