



Insight

Competition is Good for Public Schools

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Choices, competition and entrepreneurship are what make America unique. Freedom to make individual choices is the foundation of our system of government. Without it, we would not be much different than other European countries and our forefathers would not have fought so hard for these freedoms and rights. However, choices in elementary and secondary education have been limited throughout our history to the point where public education has become a monopoly with an entrenched bureaucracy more interested in protecting their system than providing a quality education to our children, particularly disadvantaged students. Wealthy parents continue to have choices because they can afford to send their children to private school or move from neighborhoods that do not provide a high quality education in the local public school. But very few economically disadvantaged parents have this choice and are therefore sometimes stuck in a public school system that does little to provide educational opportunities for their children.

Fortunately, with the growth of public charter schools, free tutoring services, and private school choice, these parents now have more options available to them to ensure that their children receive a quality education. And, in many places where public charter schools have been successful and multiplied, such competition has prompted the public school system to make changes in order to compete for students to remain in the public school.

This should be the norm, not the exception. However, too often, our public school officials have vehemently fought against the establishment of public charter schools making it difficult for them to prosper and grow in some States.

Recently, the House Education and Workforce Committee overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation, HR 2218 the Empowering Parents through Quality Public Charter Schools Act.

This legislation makes it much more difficult for States to prevent the growth of high-quality charter schools as well as limit the number of children who attend public charter schools. By allowing federal funds to be used to “replicate, update or improve existing charter schools “which have a proven record of increasing student achievement, more

academically successful charter schools will be created and open for business. Also, for the first time in Federal law, a high quality charter school is defined with a focus on academic results and increasing student academic achievement for all students, particularly disadvantaged students including students with disabilities and students who are English language learners. This is a major improvement over current law.

The legislation also requires the Secretary of Education to give priority to States that provide equitable financing for charter schools as compared to public schools in the State and allows successful charter schools to share their knowledge and expertise with public schools in their State and school districts that are struggling academically. These provisions should go a long way toward increasing the number of high quality charter schools in a State as well as providing teachers and principals at traditional public schools with successful educational models that will improve student achievement at their school. Why have States not learned from public charter schools and worked to change State laws and regulations that may help traditional public schools attain the academic results that successful charter schools have achieved? One of the reasons that public charter schools have been able to accomplish academic results is that they are not bound by the same rules and regulations as traditional public schools. But after two decades of this experiment which has proved successful in many States why are the leaders of traditional public schools still resistant to changing these restrictions? Are they so afraid of competition and the possible demise of their monopoly on K-12 education that they are blind to the accomplishments of public charter schools? Fortunately, national policy makers of both parties have recognized the academic success that public charter schools have provided to thousands of disadvantaged students and are making it easier for public charter schools to grow and expand. Unfortunately, it has taken almost 20 years for this to happen and an entire generation of students has lost the opportunity to make a choice to attend a successful public charter school.

Competition is a healthy process to weed out those who cannot make the grade, be it an individual, a business, or an institution. For over a century, our public elementary and secondary education system provided few alternatives and failed too many students. Today, public charter schools are widely accepted with over 1.5 million children attending 5,000 charter schools in 40 states. Enactment of H.R. 2218 into law will continue and strengthen this trend and allow the over 400,000 students currently on waiting lists to attend a public charter school that opportunity.

But more needs to be done to increase choice and competition in our K-12 educational system. If public schools are not showing dramatic gains in academic achievement, parents from all economic backgrounds should have numerous choices available to them to ensure

that their child receives a quality education now, not two, or five or ten years down the road. This will mean that traditional public schools must be held accountable for academic achievement or face the consequences of restructuring or closing.

This also means that more private school choice alternatives need to be available for low-income parents and students. According to the 2010 School Choice Yearbook published by the Alliance for School Choice, 12 states and the District of Columbia currently have private school choice programs serving approximately 200,000 children. These range from the federally funded DC Opportunity Scholarship program to State and locally funded private school vouchers to tax credits for private school scholarships. These private school options must have the opportunity to grow and expand just like public charter schools.

While the majority of our nation's children will continue to attend their neighborhood public school, more competition and choice will strengthen that public system. Our public school leaders and teachers should not be afraid of a little competition but rather embrace this American value. Such choices will lead to better educated students who will command better paying jobs. Choice and competition are good for our public school system and should be encouraged, not resisted.

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