



## Learn From Others' Experience With School Choice

By Dave Roland

On Nov. 6, voters in Utah decided to stay the course with the state's underachieving educational status quo, voting down a program that would have granted need-based scholarships (valued between \$500 and \$3,000) for any student whose parents choose to send them to a school other than their government-assigned public school.

### Summary

Utah voters recently rejected a universal school choice plan because they believed the widely advertised contention that it would harm public schools. Other states' experience with school choice demonstrates that those fears are utterly unfounded. Missourians dealing with failing public schools should find hope in the success of the nation's enduring school choice programs.

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The defeat of Utah's universal choice program was, in essence, a triumph of misinformation. The most commonly voiced concern about the program was that it would destroy public schools, abandoning thousands of poor and minority kids to educational oblivion and forcing the public to subsidize private-school educations for wealthy white families. The National Education Association, the NAACP, and the ACLU sounded that alarm again and again in millions of dollars' worth of advertisements preceding the election, and that message ended up resonating with Utah's voters.

Unfortunately, the message was patently false. You see, those organizations have trotted out the same stale arguments for nearly 20 years, ever since Milwaukee began considering what would become the first modern school choice program. Choice opponents repeated them ad nauseam prior to the adoption of each of the 19 programs that remain active throughout the nation. In practice, however, not one of their doom-and-gloom predictions has come to pass.

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Multiple studies of school choice programs have shown no decline in the academic performance of impacted public schools, and a recent study published by the anti-choice Economic Policy Institute even acknowledges that Milwaukee public schools' performance improved when that city's program expanded to accommodate parents' overwhelming demand for scholarships. And, contrary to all the concerns raised about bankrupting public schools, Milwaukee public schools currently spend \$12,000 per public school student while the government spends only \$6,500 to educate each scholarship student. By saving \$5,500 per scholarship student (each of whom would otherwise require the full \$12,000), the city is actually saving a great deal of money while also allowing thousands of families to enjoy schools of their choice.

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It is tragic that choice opponents' misinformation successfully persuaded Utahns to deny thousands of low-income children their first chance to attend the best schools available. A \$3,000 scholarship might not have allowed every low-income family to afford a private school education (the average private school in Utah costs between \$3,500 and \$4,000 a year), but it would have at least put that opportunity in reach for parents desperate to help their children achieve a better, more prosperous life, and it would have done so without harming public schools. The vote against this scholarship program ensures that those children will continue to have only two choices: remain in the public schools that are failing them, or drop out altogether.

Fortunately, choice programs nationwide are steadily growing and proving that educational freedom helps children succeed. Despite Tuesday's vote, Utah remains one of 14 states (including the District of Columbia) with an active school choice program. These programs almost invariably attract more applicants than they are allowed to serve, and no legislative or electoral vote has ever discontinued a school choice program once voters have been allowed to test it for themselves.

Missourians—especially those living with the consequences of failing public schools—should pay careful attention to the success of choice in other cities and states. Talk to people who live in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida, Arizona, Washington, D.C., and other places where school choice has been active for years. Rather than the dire consequences predicted by choice opponents, observers will find improved levels of overall student achievement and markedly increased satisfaction for hundreds of thousands of parents. Equipped with evidence that school choice is succeeding elsewhere, hopefully we will not succumb to the fears that have cost so many children their best chance for a high-quality education.

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