



Saint Louis Kids Deserve Choices

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By: Steve Bernstetter

Parents and students in Missouri have essentially three choices: public education in their local district, attending a private school, or home schooling. Some of those students have additional choices in the form of magnet schools and the voluntary interdistrict transfer program, also known as busing. The recent loss of accreditation in the public school system in Saint Louis, because of chronic underperformance, presents the opportunity to expand these choice programs for the benefit of all students.

There are two separate—though intimately intertwined—problems that need to be addressed in fixing the Saint Louis public schools. First, how do we provide those students currently enrolled in the unaccredited district with an opportunity for a better education? Second, how do we improve the district so that it can regain and maintain its accreditation? While these problems differ in immediacy, the solution to the former may very well be part of the solution to the latter.

County schools, and even some private schools, generally spend less per pupil than the city district. According to Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Saint Louis public schools spent an average of \$11,402 per pupil in 2006. As a comparison, my district, Mehlville R-IX, spent an average of \$7,144 per pupil in 2006, while the statewide average for district spending in Missouri was about \$8,221 per pupil in 2006. As a rough estimate, if the city is required to pay tuition and transportation costs—say \$1,000 per year, per student—it would still save money by essentially contracting out to the county district. Whatever money is left over after this transaction would presumably be sunk back into the city, thereby increasing the per-pupil funds available to students remaining in the district. This program, a kind of voucher program completely contained within the public school

system, would couple well with the current busing program.

Most proposed voucher programs rely heavily on competition between public schools and some combination of charter, magnet, and private schools. The logic behind such arrangements is simple; a variety of administrative approaches will likely lead to a wide variety of teaching methods, special programs, and systems of evaluation. Once these choices are in place, natural market forces, driven by the choices of parents in seeking the optimal education for their children, will weed out the worst and reward the best. Choice advocates further assert that by allowing market forces to take control, the entire panoply of educational opportunities will increase in quality, so that even the worst schools (tacitly assumed to be bureaucratically administered public schools) will improve significantly.

The jury is still largely out on how much competition between schools improves those schools that lose students, or by what exact mechanism competition produces those changes. Perhaps, when faced with the prospect of losing students and the funds that come with them, public school bureaucrats will start working smarter and more efficiently. More likely is the notion that, when competition starts to drain students and resources, those losing schools adopt whatever successful policies led students to the competing school in the first place. This suggests that competition-induced experimentation and variation between schools leads to new, more successful approaches to educating targeted segments of the population. In either case, it seems that part of the failure of some public schools, particularly the Saint Louis public schools, lies in an inability to innovate and specialize to meet student needs.

Many of these barriers to innovation no doubt originate in the political red tape inherent in any public institution, but that does not necessarily mean that we should abandon the public education system. Rather, a policy encouraging this mild form of competition between the county districts and the city district will provide an informative example of just how competition might work within the context of a limited voucher program, and how such competition can breed innovation. Most importantly, it will enable a group of kids, for whom choice was an unaffordable luxury, an opportunity to decide for themselves which school best meets their educational needs. Every child deserves a chance to succeed. Choice can provide that chance.

Steve Bernstetter is an intern at the Show-Me Institute and a graduate student in public policy administration at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

About the Author



Steve Bernstetter

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place 3645 Troost Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63108 Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (314) 454-0647 Phone: (816) 287-0370
Fax: (314) 454-0667

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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