



School Choice for Me, but Not for Thee: Part 5

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



By: James V. Shuls

Americans are well aware of problems in urban public schools. We see news stories about violence in the hallways and regular reports about abysmally low test scores. Could private school choice help address these issues or offer a way out for some students? When I asked [35 parents in focus groups](#) a version of this question, many had reservations. In posts [two](#), [three](#), and [four](#) of this series, I address the first three major reservations. Here I address the final one.

Reservation Number 4: School choice does not solve the larger problem of concentrated poverty.

The parents in my focus groups recognized that some schools are not doing well. That's why many of them refused to enroll their children in their local public schools. Yet many wouldn't support a state-supported private school choice program. To them, that was just a Band-Aid to cover over a problem rather than actually solving it. Instead, the concerned parents thought more needed to be done to address the root cause that led to the poor educational opportunities: poverty.

This line of argument suffers from two shortcomings. First, it sets an almost impossible expectation of school choice programs—that they solve a problem that traditional public schools have failed to solve for centuries. Rarely do we expect public policies to solve this kind of massive societal problem. Even when considering issues related to poverty, we often hope an intervention will move the needle in the right direction by a matter of degrees. When it does, we

consider it a success.

Second, this argument absolves public schools of blame for the role that they have played in exacerbating the problems of poverty. Not only have traditional public schools failed to solve the problems of poverty, in some places, they have actually made it worse. Look at the patchwork of school districts in the areas surrounding Kansas City and Saint Louis. Homes in the higher-performing districts cost more because the schools are better; wealthier families segregate themselves from lower-income families by moving to these better districts. This creates virtuous cycles within these districts, where wealthier students attend better schools, get better jobs, move to places with even better schools, and then send their children to them. But it also creates a vicious cycle in poorer-performing districts, where families that are not able to break into the housing market of better districts are shut out of higher-performing schools, are prevented from accessing better opportunities, and stay trapped in poverty.

There is nothing nefarious about a family wanting to be in a good neighborhood with great schools. There is, however, something wrong with a school system that only allows families with financial means to access great educational options.

Vouchers and charter schools have done nothing to create this situation. But they can help stop it by breaking the connection between where children live to where they go to school.

It is true that school choice does not solve issues of poverty. School choice programs also do not cure cancer, reduce tensions in North Korea, or solve male pattern baldness. In other words, school choice does not solve complicated, thorny issues that are incredibly complex. It does, however, reduce the barriers that stand between low-income families and educational opportunities for their children.

About the Author



James Shuls
Distinguished Fellow of Education Policy

James V. Shuls is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Missouri–St. Louis and Distinguished Fellow in Education Policy at the Show-Me Institute.

Read Online

<https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/school-choice/school-choice-me-not-thee-part-5>

Links

[1] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/school-choice/school-choice-me-not-thee-part-5>

[2] [http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2017.1374151?needAccess=true&";](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2017.1374151?needAccess=true&)

[3] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/school-choice/school-choice-me-not-thee-part-2>

[4] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/school-choice/school-choice-me-not-thee-part-3>

[5] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/school-choice/school-choice-me-not-thee-part-4>

Mission Statement

Advancing liberty with responsibility by promoting market solutions for Missouri public policy.

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

Support Our Work

The Show-Me Institute is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Make your tax deductible contribution today: <http://ShowMeInstitute.org/donate>