



Opportunities Abound in Private School Choice

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First impressions are hard to overcome. This is true of people and of policies. For years, school choice has been presented as a turnaround tool, an instrument to improve public education through market forces. That is partly why Missouri only has charter school options in St. Louis and Kansas City, two districts that have historically struggled to provide quality education to the children assigned to them. Now, nearly two decades later, that impression persists.

Don't believe me? When the Missouri legislature tries to expand charter schools outside of Kansas City and St. Louis—as they do every year—go to one of the hearings. The word you will probably hear most is “accountability.” “Competition” might be a close second (although “money” crops up quite a bit as well).

When we talk about how options like charter schools will bring choice and competition, we focus too much on the *competition* and forget about the *choice*. Choice is the heart of the issue.

Parents want different things for their children. Some want their children to attend schools that focus on the arts, others want STEM, and still others want foreign languages. Families from different religious and ethnic backgrounds want to send their children to schools that reflect their values, history, tradition, and culture. They should have that choice.

In a recent paper for the Show-Me Institute, I estimated that there are currently more than

28,000 available seats in existing private schools. This total does not include the students who already choose these alternative models. Rather, it represents the gap between each private school's highest enrollment and their current enrollment. To put this into perspective, there is currently enough space in Missouri's private schools to accommodate every student in the state's largest school district.

These open seats are scattered across the state, including in districts where the traditional public schools are accredited and most people in the community are satisfied. So why, one might ask, do we need to subsidize families sending their children there? Those 28,000 seats represent opportunities for families to find the school that fits their values and suits their child. A voucher or a scholarship program could open these doors to thousands of Missouri families. It would allow parents to choose to send their child to a Montessori school or a classical academy.

Parents need to know that school choice programs are not simply about keeping the public schools on their toes or about giving parents an escape from a failing school; although that does happen. That is only part of the story.

The rest of the story is that middle- and upper-class Missourians, for years, have sent their children to schools outside of the public sector for religious, social, and educational reasons. Look at the civic, political, and economic leaders of Missouri. How many of them either attended private school, sent their children to private school or both? Why shouldn't all Missourians have that ability?

Unless we change our impression of school choice, we are unlikely to see these opportunities come to Missouri families. Instead, we'll see the legislature wring its hands about increasing accountability for charter schools or improving the test-based accountability system for public schools. Education is about so much more than doing well on a standardized test. Through education, we teach values and shape minds. Therefore, let's talk about school choice for what it really is—a means to increase educational freedom.

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