



WHERE LIBERTY
COMES FIRST

ESSAY

FEBRUARY 2013

ADVANCING LIBERTY
WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING
MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI
PUBLIC POLICY



WHY WE NEED SCHOOL CHOICE

By James V. Shuls

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the country, lawmakers have discussed expanding educational options for students by establishing charter schools or allowing public dollars to go to private schools. Yet bills that legislators proposed often failed to gain much traction; in part, because opponents of school choice often hail the traditional system where children are zoned for a local public school based on their address. Some view this method of delivering public education as the model because democratically elected officials control the schools on a local level. Though democratically controlled local school districts

meet the needs of many students, they simply cannot satisfy the needs of all families. Many families, mine included, have found the traditional system to be frustrating and unresponsive.

In this essay, I describe the problem with the democratic process regarding public education from my perspective. You may be inclined to agree or disagree with my conclusions about math pedagogy after reading my story. Nevertheless, this story is not written to convince you one way or the other in terms of math instruction. Rather, my story illustrates the difficulties a parent faces when attempting to exact change in his child's school. In

We sought change, but in the end, we were left with only two options: subject our kids to a style of instruction we felt was ineffective or place our children in a private school.

the 2011-12 school year, my children spent 100 days in a traditional public school. I did not anticipate pulling them in the middle of the year, but my wife and I could not come to terms with how the school was educating our children. We sought change, but in the end, we were left with only two options: subject our kids to a style of instruction we felt was ineffective or place our children in a private school. We chose the latter.

Though this story takes place in Arkansas, it very well could happen in your town. Indeed, this story could take place anywhere parents do not have access to quality educational options for their children. At the time, Arkansas had some charter schools, but these schools were severely hampered from opening because of local school district opposition and the sole charter authorizer, the state board of education. In previous years, charters had sought to open in our district, but the local school district vehemently opposed the move. This meant there were no elementary charter schools in our district. Our only free public options were the traditional public schools.

MY STORY

My wife and I sent our kids to a local public school for the 2011-12 school year because of financial reasons. They had attended a private school for pre-school and kindergarten, but the monthly tuition quickly overwhelmed

my wife's teacher's salary and my fellowship as a graduate student. Though we were upset that we would no longer be able to send our kids to a school that shared our religious values, we were sure our kids would receive a quality education at the local public school. We also knew we would be supplementing their education at home. After all, my wife and I were both educators. In fact, my wife was in her eighth year teaching Spanish, with the most recent years served in the district in which we lived. I had taught both first and fifth grade in southwest Missouri and hold bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education. Suffice it to say, we were not your average parents.

Unfortunately, when we moved to the area, we had not fully considered the quality of the local public schools. As it turned out, our house was in the school zone for the second-lowest performing school in the district. In the 2010-11 academic year, the school placed near the bottom quarter of all schools in the state in math achievement as well as in language arts. When we became aware of this, we requested permission for our kids to attend one of the higher-performing schools in the district. The schools, however, did not have enough space to accommodate our children. So we applied for our children to attend a school that was fairly close to our house and had better achievement scores than our residentially assigned school. The

school ranked in the middle of all elementary schools in the district. In other words, it was an average-performing school in an average-performing district.

NEW SCHOOL, NEW MATH

At first, we were happy with our decision. It turned out that the assistant principal was a friend of a friend and we had heard wonderful things about our daughter's kindergarten teacher. Our kids seemed to like the school and were making plenty of friends. However, all of our pleasant emotions soon changed. A few weeks into school, our son brought home a paper from his teacher describing how students would be doing math problems. Unfortunately, I did not keep a copy of this document, but I have reproduced it to the best of my recollection (*see* Figure 1).

The letter from the school told us that our kids would be working on word problems throughout the school year. The school would expect students to use a variety of strategies to solve these problems. As an example, the page displayed a typical word problem and described three methods children might use to solve the problem. In the first strategy, the student wrote tally marks for each object in the problem and counted the tally marks when more objects were added. In the next strategy, the student chunked the larger number into groups of five and added the

additional five by counting by fives. The third strategy seemed even more sophisticated, as the student broke 15 into 10 and five and then added five. It seemed that these highlighted solutions were increasingly complex, with the third child showing the deepest understanding of place value and addition. I assumed that the next logical step would be to teach

Figure 1: Reproduction of a Math Explanation Page That Our Son's First-Grade Teacher Sent Home

Your child will be completing lots of word problems this year and they will use a variety of strategies to solve these problems. Below are examples of three strategies your children might use for the following problem.

Stuart has fifteen pencils. Trae gives him five more. How many pencils does Stuart have altogether?

Example 1.

$$\text{|||||} + \text{|||||} = 20$$

Example 2.

$$\textcircled{5} \textcircled{5} \textcircled{5} + \textcircled{5} = 20$$

Example 3.

$$\begin{array}{|c|} \hline 10 \\ \hline \end{array} \begin{array}{|c|} \hline 5 \\ \hline \end{array} + \begin{array}{|c|} \hline 5 \\ \hline \end{array} = 20$$

Please do not have your child stack numbers and add them like this.

$$\begin{array}{r} 15 \\ + 5 \\ \hline 20 \end{array}$$

I am not an average parent and I cannot help wonder what a parent who is not a professional educator might feel like under such circumstances.

the standard algorithm for addition, whereby the numbers are stacked and added one column at a time (as students have been taught to add since time immemorial). Yet to my horror, the bottom of the page had the standard algorithm written with a big “X” over the top. The page encouraged parents not to teach their child to use this method.

“This is crazy,” I thought to myself, so my wife and I scheduled a meeting with the teacher. During the meeting, I brought up my concerns about our son not being able to use the standard algorithm to solve math problems. She informed me the district had adopted a math program where they were focusing on “deep understanding,” a phrase I would come to hear often in the coming months. In a very short period of time, I realized that I was not going to change her mind about the value of standard algorithms. Not wanting to make a fuss about a problem I believed I could solve, I decided to supplement my son’s math instruction at home. This plan absolutely backfired. Supplementing, it turned out, became a nearly impossible task. Our tutoring sessions become increasingly adversarial, with my son ending up in tears multiple times because I was telling him to solve the problem one way and his “teacher doesn’t do it that way,” because she discouraged him from using the standard algorithm. Clearly, this was not a sustainable solution.

On November 14, 2011, I sent an impassioned email to my son’s teacher. Three days later, I received a reply. My son’s teacher thanked me for my concern and asked to schedule a meeting with me. When I confirmed the time, I received an email from the principal indicating we would be meeting in her office. In my email, I had requested information about the district’s math curriculum, which I again requested when confirming the meeting time. On November 18, the teacher sent home the information I had requested. The documents she sent included a two-page overview of the *Common Core* standards for first grade and a copy of a page from *Children’s Mathematics: Cognitively Guided Instruction* (1999). This page happened to be the final part of chapter one of the book, which highlighted what the book would discuss.

THE MEETING,

THE CURRICULUM,

THE FRUSTRATION

Walking into my son’s school to talk math curriculum to his teacher and principal intimidated me. It kind of felt like I had challenged my son’s teacher on the content of what she was teaching and now I was being sent to the principal’s office. Now, I am not an average parent and I cannot help wonder what a parent who is not a professional educator might feel like under such circumstances. The school is comprised predominantly

of minority students, many of whom are English language learners. If I felt intimidated, what about other, less informed parents? Still, I marched into the meeting full of optimism. My goal was singular: to make sure my children could use standard algorithms to solve math problems.

The teacher explained that the district was using *Cognitively Guided Instruction* (CGI) as the method to teach the *Common Core State Standards*. I was a bit confused. In the CGI book, the authors clearly stated CGI was a professional development program and I knew that Common Core was the name of the standards being implemented in the state. So I inquired where the curriculum came from, to which the reply was the Common Core. After some back and forth, the principal chimed in that she had researched the answer to my question in preparation for our meeting. Why she did not know the curriculum being used in her own school ahead of time, I do not know. Nevertheless, she informed me that she had spoken with the assistant superintendent for education, who informed her that the Common Core standards were the district's curriculum and they were using CGI to implement those standards.

I realized that I could spend all day going down that rabbit hole, but I remembered my goal so I asked point blank: could my son use a standard algorithm to solve a math problem in his class. The teacher responded, "We don't do the algorithm in class." When

I asked why, she maintained that he needed to show his reasoning behind his thinking. I pushed the issue and asked if she would count it wrong if he explained he knew it was a difference problem, he stacked the numbers to subtract the ones and then the 10 and was left with the difference between the two numbers. She indicated she would not count this wrong, but she would make him show a way that he could demonstrate that he knew what he was doing. The principal also responded that he would have to illustrate his understanding.

Over the course of the next hour, we went through examples of my son's work where he had used one of the "strategies" he had developed. To me, the strategies were inconsistent, cumbersome, and time-consuming. To his teacher, his strategies were "advanced." The conversation went nowhere. I inquired as to what the next step might be; if he was already using advanced strategies, what was the next strategy he needed to learn? The teacher responded that it would just depend. Just depend? I thought, certainly there must be some end goal, some place she was trying to move all of the students in terms of math skills. She stated that the endpoint depended on each student and where they were in terms of understanding.

My kids' school, by their own admission, had not taught my son or daughter how to solve any math problems in nearly half of the school year. Anything

***My kids' school,
by their own
admission,
had not taught my
son or daughter
how to solve any
math problems in
nearly half of the
school year.***

Until we empower parents with school vouchers, tuition-tax credit scholarships, and charter schools, my family's struggle, and the struggle of families similar to mine, will continue.

he had learned, he had discovered for himself. And what was perhaps most galling was their certainty that he could not use the standard algorithm, even though they had no idea where he was going or how he should get there. The rest of the conversation was not helpful. They threw out buzzwords such as “discovery learning,” but could never explain to me that all of these other methods that they endorsed were acceptable, while the standard algorithm was not. Perhaps because she realized that the conversation was not going anywhere, the principal suggested I observe one of these lessons to get a better understanding of how Cognitively Guided Instruction works. However, I should say that by the end of the conversation, I had convinced them that my son could use the standard algorithm, as long as he did each problem another way to show his thinking. Which meant he would have to do every problem the way they wanted and the way I wanted; still, this was no small feat.

THE OBSERVATIONS

The principal scheduled me to observe math lessons in first-, second-, and third-grade classrooms on January 11 and 12, 2012. During each of the observations, the district math specialist accompanied me, and the principal joined for part of the time. The first observation was a first-grade classroom. The teacher was enthusiastic and had a great command of the classroom. I could tell she had experience and connected

well with her students. To start the lesson, she read the word problem aloud with the students. It was a multiplication problem in which a boy had five bags and 12 cars in each bag. The teacher wanted to know the total number of cars. Students were reminded to use their strategies to solve the problem, but were not given any specific strategies. What struck me most was the labor-intensive nature of this form of instruction.

Again, I have been in a lot of classrooms and have come to have a pretty good understanding of what a good teacher looks like. This was a good teacher, who had other adults in the room helping her. However, even this good teacher could not get around to every student and take the time to help them understand the nuances of every problem-solving strategy that they had developed. As a result, some students were copying, some students had no one-on-one instruction, and other students looked just plain lost. In the entire hour-long lesson, the students worked on only this problem, and by the end, several students appeared no closer to an answer than when they began. Three students were invited to share their strategies at the end of the class, but after they shared their strategies, the lesson was over. The teacher never explained how to solve the problem.

My experiences in the second- and third-grade classes mirrored the first observation. Some students developed strategies, some did not. Never once

did a teacher directly teach students how to solve a math problem. At the end of my three hours of observing, I realized that this instructional method encouraged even those students with deeper understanding to work extremely slowly and absolutely left behind all other students. After that day, I had seen enough.

WHAT NEXT?

My wife and I talked about my observations and contemplated our options. We could continue to pursue change in the school, but this was proving to be a futile task. We had already met with our son's teacher, the assistant principal, the principal, and the district math specialist, who all had no intention of changing their instructional practices. Who should we meet with next? Would they be any more responsive? We could take matters to the school board, but would they listen? Even if pursuing these options may have led to change, how long would it take? We saw no light at the end of that tunnel. We may have been able to attend a different school within the district, but we were told each school used a similar approach for teaching math. This type of choice is no choice. Rather than subject our children to more math lessons devoid of content, and despite the heavy financial burden, we re-enrolled them in a private school.

On January 25, I sent the following email to my kids' teachers and principals:

I am writing to inform you this Friday will be [my kids'] last day at [Your] Elementary. I want to thank each of you for the role you have played in my child's education and for your commitment to kids. Due to irreconcilable differences of opinion on curriculum and instructional practice, we have decided to pursue other educational options for our children.

The private school welcomed our kids to start on Monday, January 30. It just so happened that their last day at the public school was the 100th day of school.

CONCLUSION

Over and over my wife and I kept saying to ourselves, "If this is how they treat us, I can't imagine how they treat the other parents." If a teacher from that same school district and a former teacher finishing a Ph.D. in Education Policy cannot change what is clearly an absurd practice in their children's school, imagine what happens when a less connected family has a problem that needs to be solved. Sending our children to private schools takes up an enormous amount of our household budget, and quite frankly, it should not. In the United States of America, all families, rich and poor, white and minority, should have access to a high-quality education for their children. Schools should be responsive to the wishes of parents. But, as long as the

In the United States of America, all families, rich and poor, white and minority, should have access to a high-quality education for their children.

"This must-read piece by James Shuls connects Common Core, Math Corruption, and the need for school choice."

~Michelle Malkin

Originally published in Education News webpage, January 16, 2013.

www.educationnews.org

barriers for taking kids out of the school system are so high, very few families are going to be able to hold schools accountable.

This problem was and is real for us and it is real for families across the country. This is just one of the reasons states should expand school choice for all students. Though opponents wish to portray schools and school districts as bastions of democracy, they are not. The power is clearly stacked against parents, and it is stacked that way because it can be. Until we empower parents with school vouchers, tuition-

tax credit scholarships, and charter schools, my family's struggle, and the struggle of families similar to mine, will continue.

James V. Shuls is an Education Policy Analyst at the Show-Me Institute which promotes market solutions for Missouri public policy.

Join the fight for liberty in our state. Become a Show-Me Institute supporter at showmeinstitute.org/donate.

Examples of my children's work

Ashton has 3 boxes. There are 10 ornaments in each box. How many ornaments does he have in all?
(3, 10) (3, 15) (3, 25) (3, 39)

Job!

10 10 10

30

45

5 + 5 + 5 = 15

30 + 15

Leslie has 20 books and Madison has 25 books. How many more books does Madison have than Leslie?
(30, 45) (30, 55)

20 25

20

45

(30, 45)

5

30 45