



The Case for Expanded Educational Choice in Rhode Island

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THE ISSUE

The Rhode Island public school system is failing far too many students and families. Collectively, our schools yield one of the lowest values in New England and the nation when it comes to educational performance as compared with per pupil spending. The public recognizes this major problem for our state.

While some long-term reforms are underway, there remain tens of thousands of Ocean State families who do not have access to near-term solutions for their children and who do not have the luxury of waiting for promises about tomorrow's reforms. The limited, current options available to parents in Rhode Island do not satisfy their demands for a quality education — today.

Our precious educational dollars can be more effectively utilized by empowering parents with the freedom to choose the best educational paths that will help their children learn and grow, while also brightening Rhode Island's future.

EDUCATIONAL CHOICE IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Recent statements by state and local elected officials, combined with stated goals in any number of major public policy ideas, leave little disagreement that a great educational system is paramount to Rhode Island's future prosperity, that graduating skilled students is the key to success for any individual wishing to succeed in life, and that growth of Rhode Island's economy is contingent

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upon producing a qualified workforce that can attract major employers and inspire an entrepreneurial spirit.

The most valuable assets in education are our students. The most valuable assets to Rhode Island's future prosperity are our students. It is vital that educational spending be optimized to ensure that every child receives the best education possible, leading to a brighter future and a better quality of life for future generations.

ALL OUR CHILDREN, ALL OUR SCHOOLS

The Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity recommends that Rhode Islanders consider a holistic view of our state's educational system. If we consider that:

- All children of RI families are our students, and
- All educational institutions — public or private — serve our children, and
- Most residents directly or indirectly pay taxes toward the education of our children, then

- Why should those funds be used exclusively to support the monopoly of government-run schools, as opposed to the more fundamental goal of ensuring an educated population?
- Why wouldn't we all be better off if we could direct funds to where they will be used most effectively to educate our children?

Taxpayer dollars should be wisely spent to maximize the effectiveness of our state's entire educational system. Spending taxpayer dollars exclusively to fund public school systems fails to meet this test when there may be more effective options available and especially when many public schools fail to meet the educational needs of certain individual students.

It can only benefit our state if private schools, charter schools, and home schools are allowed to pick up the slack *and provide the quality education our children deserve, which is the entire rationale for public funding of education in the first place.*

BRIGHT TODAY EDUCATIONAL CHOICE CAMPAIGN

Every family deserves to feel confident that their children can hope for a bright tomorrow because they will have access to a quality education — today.

Every child deserves a bright *today* educational opportunity!

The RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity has partnered with the nationally renowned Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, in addition to a growing coalition of local grassroots groups, to

Why should funds intended to foster an educated population be used exclusively to support the monopoly of government-run schools?

launch a long-term campaign seeking to expand educational opportunities for all Rhode Island families, called the Bright Today Educational Choice Campaign.

Every child has a unique learning capacity, with specific individual needs, and therefore, taxpayer funding of education should be geared to fund students, not school systems. In Rhode Island, the state has taken initial steps in its funding formula so that, to some extent, educational funding is apportioned based on student enrollment. Yet, not only is the formula designed to treat students as numbers, rather than individual children, but it is limited in scope to government-run schools.

This approach in the Ocean State has severe limitations, leaving behind far too many students who, by default, may be condemned to attend failing schools simply because of the zip code in which they live.

Public money should “follow the student,” because it is that child in whom the public has an interest, not a particular school building or system.

Increasing educational options for parents can produce life-changing transformation for their children.

FAILURES OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM IN RHODE ISLAND

According to the Friedman Foundation:¹

... educational options are desperately needed. The monopolistic public educational system in the United States has failed generations of children and left too many ill-prepared to be productive citizens and reap the benefits of a free society. For students who do graduate, too many leave high school without adequate numeracy and literacy skills.

The one-size-fits-all approach of Rhode Island's current, government-run public school system, created by the typical zip-code assignment system, does not allow for every child to reach his or her full educational potential.

Low Value

Overall, the value of taxpayer dollars spent on education in Rhode Island is low:²

- Rhode Island spending per student is among the highest 10 in the nation, yet K–12 performance and progress is among the lowest-10.
- The high school graduation rate for RI students is the worst in New England.
- RI's 4th grade students score worse in both reading and math as compared to all our New England counterparts, an adverse condition that has existed since the turn of the millennium.³
- On the state's own New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests, no grade level scored better than 81% proficient in reading (11th grade) or 63% proficient in math (4th grade), in the 2013-2014 school year, and

The limited availability of existing school choice programs is not meeting the demands of Rhode Island families.

only 35% of 11th graders were proficient in math. The average of all reading and math scores has barely budged in the last four years and, in fact, has been slipping for the past three.⁴

RI Schools Failing At-Risk Students

Minority students, students from low-income families, and children with disabilities in Rhode Island especially suffer in government schools. According to the national report card on schools and national NAEP scores:

- Black, poor, and (especially) Hispanic students in RI perform lower than national averages, as do students with disabilities.⁵
- Performance of RI students with disabilities has declined over the past seven years.
- Hispanic students in Florida out-perform overall results for all students in Rhode Island in 4th grade reading following aggressive educational reforms in the Sunshine State.

DEMAND FOR CHOICE EXCEEDS SUPPLY

The limited availability of existing school choice programs is not meeting the demands of Rhode Island families:

- There are approximately 142,000 K–12 public school children in Rhode Island (including charter schools) plus another 17,000 or so in private schools.
- Zero students are currently eligible for any statewide voucher-type program.
- Only about 300 under-served students were able to take part in RI’s existing corporate tax credit scholarship program in 2013:
 - Fewer than 50% of RI children even qualify for this program.
 - Only 31% of companies wishing to participate in this program were allowed to contribute.
- Only about 5,500 under-served students were fortunate enough to win a lottery to attend one of RI’s 16 charter schools in 2013:
 - Potentially, tens of thousands of other students were condemned to remain in schools that were not their family’s first choice. For the current school year, charter schools had 1,300 available seats, and about 11,800 students applied for them.
 - RI charter school laws receive a “D” grade.⁶

Contributing to this lack of achievement for students in government-run schools are oppressive collective-bargaining provisions in most school district contracts with teachers’ unions. These bargaining mandates limit flexibility for teachers to work to their fullest individual capacity and require certain taxpayer dollars to be spent away from the direct educational needs of students. Instead, many funds are shifted toward inflated personnel costs, with some even directly funding union activities.

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IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

Thousands of students and families across America are enthusiastically taking advantage of multiple forms of educational choice options to enhance their educational experience. The possibilities are numerous and compelling.

Imagine an educational reform path that would empower parents to choose and craft a customized educational program of their own choice for their own children.

According to the Friedman Foundation, “As various evaluations have shown, educational choice improves academic outcomes, increases graduation rates, and elevates parental satisfaction.”⁷

By empowering parents with the ability to direct a portion of the state’s share of educational funding toward environments emphasizing academic

excellence, instead of toward traditional public school systems, an environment can be created for every child to reach his or her full potential.⁸

Imagine improved academic outcomes for students who remain in the public school system.

Researcher Greg Forster examined almost two dozen “gold standard” school choice evaluation studies across the nation and found that 11 of the 12 studies concluded that school choice programs led to a positive impact on academic outcomes, while not a single study showed a negative outcome.

Further, Foster learned that 22 of 23 empirical studies on school choice found that academic outcomes *at public schools* were positive, with no study showing an adverse impact.⁹

This makes sense. No matter the product or service, increased competition improves quality and lowers costs. The positive competitive pressures placed on public schools that co-exist with school choice programs generally force those public schools to respond positively by ensuring that they are adequately serving every child and that families are more informed about the quality of the education their children are receiving.

If public schools fail to adjust and continue to lose more students to alternative educational programs, then they are undeserving of continuing to receive public funding. Again this makes sense, as the rationale for public funding of education is to ensure that all our children are well educated — not to maintain a system of government-run schools, no matter its efficacy.

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Imagine increased student safety and parental satisfaction.

“Parents in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program reported thinking their children’s new private schools were safer than their former public schools, rating the private schools significantly better in terms of safety than did parents in the public system. For many parents in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, school safety was paramount.”¹⁰

The Holy Grail: imagine higher graduation rates for Rhode Island students.

Researcher Patrick Wolf, found that school choice significantly boosts graduation rates, by as much as 21 percentage points. Similar studies have reached similar conclusions. Wolf notes that high school graduation is the “Holy Grail” for inner city students, who will subsequently be more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, and be more likely to stay out of jail.¹¹

Imagine more money for every public school student.

It is widely held that school choice programs mean less money for public school students. *This is false.*

The *Bright Today Scholarship Accounts* that the Center will propose in the near future as the centerpiece of its recommended school choice policy reforms, will actually increase spending for every student remaining in the public school system. Additionally, the total amount of money spent on education in Rhode Island — including public, private, and home schools — will also increase!

Imagine teachers being free to instruct to their fullest capacity and free to be rewarded for their good work.

Often, strict collective-bargaining provisions in public school districts restrict the flexibility of teachers to provide students with the personalized education they require. Certain other provisions protect low-performing teachers from being held accountable, while seniority provisions often mean that high-performing, young teachers are the first to be laid off. Such rigid pay scale mandates further restrict great teachers from having the leverage to negotiate fair-market contracts for their proven value to our communities.

In the more open work environment that expanded school choice programs would foster, teachers would have more employment options and be able to demand due reward for their effective work. Teachers are empowered as employees when their employers have to compete for their services.

Bright Today Scholarship Accounts will increase spending for every student remaining in the public school system and increase the total amount of money spent on education in Rhode Island.

Imagine everyone winning via expanded educational choice options.

The national research supporting expanded school choice options is irrefutable:

- Student achievement is higher.
- Parents are more satisfied.
- Classrooms become more integrated.
- Public schools improve, with more money available per public school student.
- Taxpayers receive more value for their tax dollars.
- Teachers enjoy expanded employment options.

MYTHS VS. REALITY

Opponents of empowering parents with expanded educational choice options often trot out trite myths. Some of the most common myths:

Myth: Educational choice will mean less funding for public school students.

Reality: Educational choice means more money per public school student, and more total money spent on education in Rhode Island.¹²

Myth: Educational choice harms the performance of students in public school systems.

Reality: Positive pressures created by giving parents choices actually increases academic outcomes at public schools.¹³

Myth: School choice “skims” the best students away from public school systems.

Reality: Students who are currently succeeding in public schools tend to stay put. Those who need a change will tend to choose to leave.¹⁴

Myth: Teacher pay will fall because there will be more private schools, and they pay less than public schools.

Reality: With more money being spent on education in the state, teachers will enjoy expanded teaching opportunities and, in many cases, will be able to earn their true market value.¹⁵

Myth: Parents are not equipped to make decisions about their children’s education.

Reality: Educational choice leaves decisions to those who care most about their children and best understand their unique educational needs.¹⁶

Myth: School choice violates the separation of church and state.

Reality: Educational choice actually gets government out of religion and does not violate any state or national constitutional provision.¹⁷

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THE PUBLIC SUPPORTS SCHOOL CHOICE

A 2013 public survey conducted among Rhode Islanders by the Friedman Foundation, in conjunction with the RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity, showed strong public support for the concept and need for public funds to follow students to any school of their choice:¹⁸

- 60% gave a negative rating the state’s public school system.
- Over 60% of school parents, low-income earners, urbanites, and young voters support school vouchers of some kind.
- 56% overall support school vouchers.

Additionally, Rhode Island families are materially demonstrating their desire to enroll their children in schools other than traditional government-run schools, according to a study the Center released in January 2015.¹⁹ In that study, it was shown that among states with high student SAT participation, only Hawaii had a higher percentage of students enrolled overall in private schools than Rhode Island, which did lead the nation in the percentage of SAT-taking students attending religiously affiliated schools.

The Center’s assessment of the significance of the religious affiliation isn’t the religion, per se, but rather the lower cost associated with such schools.

The SAT results, themselves, show that greater value is recognized by parents in Rhode Island through lower costs coupled with higher student achievement in private schools. Other parents in our state should have expanded opportunities to realize such value.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Rhode Island’s public school system is failing too many of our children, that parents and the general public recognize this problem, and that they want alternative options to provide their children with a brighter educational future, even if that means allowing taxpayer funds to follow students to any school of their choice.

Empowering parents in the Ocean State to design a proper educational path for their children is what the Bright Today campaign is all about.

¹ Burke, Lindsey M. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. *The Education Debit Card: What Arizona Parents Purchase with Education Savings Accounts*, p.4. August 2013. Available at: www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/1015/THE-EDUCATION-DEBIT-CARD-What-Arizona-Parents-Purchase-with-Education-Savings-Accounts.pdf (accessed 1/6/15)

² RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity. “Report Card on Rhode Island ‘Competitiveness.’” 2014. Available at: rifreedom.org/RIReportCard/ (accessed 1/6/15)

³ RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity. “States on the Nation’s Report Card.” Available at: rifreedom.org/states-on-the-nations-report-card (accessed 1/6/15)

⁴ Rhode Island Department of Education. “InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting,” statewide data. Available at: infoworks.ride.ri.gov/state/ri (accessed 1/6/15)

⁵ Ibid at note 3. This statement averages grade levels and subject scores.

⁶ Ibid at note 2.

⁷ Ibid at note 1, p.3.

⁸ Ibid, p.4.

⁹ Ibid, p.5.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.6.

¹¹ Ibid, p.6.

¹² Spalding, Jeff. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. *The School Voucher Audit: Do Publicly Funded Private School Choice Programs Save Money?*, p.8, figure 4. September 30, 2014. Available at: www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/The-School-Voucher-Audit--Do-Publicly-Funded-Private-School-Choice-Programs-Save-Money-.aspx (accessed 1/6/15)

¹³ Chingos, Matthew M., and Paul E. Peterson. *EducationNext*. “The Impact of School Vouchers on College Enrollment.” Summer 2013. Available at: educationnext.org/the-impact-of-school-vouchers-on-college-enrollment (accessed 1/6/15)

¹⁴ Zimmer, Ron, et al. “Do charter schools ‘cream skim’ students and increase racial-ethnic segregation?” Available at: www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/presentations/Zimmer-Gill-Booker-Lavertu-Witte.pdf (accessed 1/6/15)

¹⁵ Bast, Joseph L., Herbert J. Walberg, and Bruno Behrend. The Heartland Institute. “How Teachers in Texas Would Benefit from Expanding School Choice.” April 2011. Available at: heartland.org/sites/all/modules/custom/heartland_migration/files/pdfs/29976.pdf (accessed 1/6/15)

¹⁶ DiPerna, Paul. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. “Rhode Island K–12 and School Choice Survey.” October 29, 2013. Available at: www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/Rhode-Island-K-12-and-School-Choice-Survey.aspx (accessed 1/6/15)

¹⁷ Katz, Justin, and Michael Cirrotti. RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity. “The School Choice Idea in Rhode Island: Myths, Opinions, and Realities,” p.3. October 29, 2013. Available at: rifreedom.org/2013/10/the-school-choice-idea-in-rhode-island-myths-opinions-and-realities (accessed 1/6/15)

¹⁸ Ibid at note 16.

¹⁹ Katz, Justin. RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity. “Parents’ Choosing Without School Choice: College Board Data and Parental Choice.” Not yet public at time of writing.