

Education Choice: The Best Choice for West Virginia

Alexandra Ensor, Bachelor of Arts Candidate, Western University

This paper discusses the potential benefits of a more robust education choice movement for West Virginia and includes a short history of the school choice movement, a simple explanation of the various reform options, and discusses some of the most popular oppositions to the movement.

For most people, a child's education is not something generally associated with the word 'choice' – especially for those living in a rural community. Children simply attend the school that serves their district. If a child lives in a less favorable neighborhood, chances are that that child will be forced to attend a less favorable school. Because of this lack of choice, schools never have an issue with enrollment numbers; student enrollment is almost guaranteed. Think about this: if enrollment is guaranteed, then what incentives are there for schools to perform well? The simple answer is that there is little motivation, and unfortunately, West Virginia is paying the price for an archaic approach to continue to support an ineffective system.

West Virginia Snapshot

West Virginia is America's third most rural state, with over 51 percent of people living in rural communities.ⁱ Some skeptics of the school choice program might bring forward arguments about lack of resources and availability of teachers as reasons why school choice cannot be effective in a rural environment. I will argue that this line of thought is incorrect; this argument will be addressed later in the 'opposition' section.

One article, written by the Friedman Foundation, reported that in West Virginia, there are 814 rural charter schools, and 7,045 rural private schools.ⁱⁱ According to another source, West Virginia's high schools ranked 44th overall in the United States, ranking 46th for school system quality and 22nd for school safety in 2015.ⁱⁱⁱ These are not impressive statistics; in fact, these statistics show the urgency and importance for change in the West Virginia school system. The National Center for Education Statistics evaluated earning potential and education across the nation, ranking schools based on the connection between the two factors. This source reported that students in West Virginia consistently ranked below national averages in 2015.^{iv} These numbers, while disappointing, are not from a lack of trying – or spending.

In 2013, the national average per-student spending amount on education was \$10,700; West Virginia spent an average of \$11,100 per student on education. Ohio spent almost exactly the same amount, but ranked 22nd overall.^v One study, conducted by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, evaluated the overall health of the charter school movement for the 2013-14 school year, and found that Ohio's ranking was

17th overall.^{vi} According to the US Census Bureau, Arizona spent, on average per student, \$7,208 in 2013 – a number that is among the lowest in the nation.^{vii} The same NAPCS report discussed above analyzed the health of Arizona's school choice movement to be 14th overall.^{viii} These numbers show us that s the state does not need to spend a lot of money to get results. Arizona is a prime example of this. West Virginia does not need to spend more money on students What West Virginia needs to do is change its focus; more money is not the answer, but change and innovation is.

Think of education choice in terms of a market system. The school is the product, and the children (and, to a larger extent, their parents) are the consumers. With a fully-functional market, choice is a major part of the process. The consumer will want the best option for their money, so the failing or sub-par product will either improve or will cease to exist – and another product will take its place. With education choice, failing schools will be forced to improve, or face the risk of declining enrollment due to unhappy customers, i.e., parents and students. Parents and students will not only have the option to choose where the student goes, but also where the money goes. With education choice, options include school vouchers, education savings accounts (ESA), tax credits and deductions, and tax credit scholarships. Each of these alternatives will be discussed later in this report.

History of Education Choice

Education choice in America, while an increasingly prevalent topic of discussion, is not new. In fact, the idea of education choice predates the current, centralized public schools that are the norm today. From the early 17th to 19th centuries, schooling was either private for those who could afford it, or funded by religious organizations for those who were unable to pay for it. Thomas Jefferson proposed the idea that those who could not afford private education should have the opportunity to secure scholarships from the state to pay for their education. This is the early version of what we know now to be the school voucher program. In the 1830's, the idea of public schools became popular, and it was at this point where the opportunity for parental choice was supplanted by a centralized, government-owned and operated school system. Rather than schools becoming centers for innovation and growth,

bureaucratization and uniformity took over. However, over time, it has become clear that the centralized school system is inefficient and ineffective.^{ix}

In the mid-1950s, Milton Friedman resurrected the idea of increased education choice, promoting what eventually came to be known as the school voucher program. With this concept, the government would still play a part in financing education through vouchers, but would leave the administration of educational institutions to private entities. Again, in 1990, a surge in popularity towards school choice could be seen. Alongside this popularity came implementation of the nation's first school choice program. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was the first step towards school choice, implementing tax credits and voucher programs. Since then, several similar programs have surfaced in states across America allowing for school choice. West Virginia was not one of them.^x

Choice, as it has been described thus far, refers to the modern 'education choice' movement that includes vouchers, ESAs, and state-implemented programs. What is important to understand, however, is that most middle class American families already have a significant level of choice – many families choose their residence based on the location of a specific school district. Others might choose a specific private school that they wish their children to attend. Traditionally, the wealthier the family, the more choice that family had when it came to education, whether it were school district location or private school.^{xi} What the current education choice movement promotes is the provision of this same level of choice to all families, regardless of income.

Education Choice Explained

Education choice, if implemented, has the opportunity to greatly improve West Virginia's school system. The next section of this paper will discuss the benefits of school choice, and considers its various alternatives.

Alternatives

The first alternative to the current, centralized public education system is a school voucher system where credits are available that can be applied to private (religious or not) education tuition. With the school voucher program, parents can take the money allocated to their child,

and spend that money on a privately funded education of their choosing. Currently, 12 states and Washington DC participate in the voucher programs. This type of program incentivizes schools to excel in order to attract parents with vouchers who are looking for the best school possible for their children. This creates competition in school systems, improving quality of education and the school experience for students.^{xii} This type of program could have great benefits for parents and students alike – both would gain.

The school voucher program is, essentially, a more limited version of education savings accounts, which will be discussed later in this paper. One report looked at 19 international studies, analyzing results and impacts of school vouchers internationally. The report found a strong positive effect of school vouchers on math and reading outcomes.^{xiii} The report also found that publicly funded programs fared better than privately funded programs, due to higher dollar amounts being offered with public programs.^{xiv} With this information, the USA is on the right track. The current model uses taxes already allocated for education purposes for the school choice programs.

The only issue that might arise comes from the availability of these schools. Charter schools are expensive to build, and private schools are not necessarily always available. The argument can be made, however, for the benefit of these schools. After all, they would not survive if they were not desired. In fact, many rural areas in the United States already have several school choice options. In 2014, the Friedman Foundation wrote an article about rural areas and school choice. This article reported that there were 814 rural charter schools, and 7,045 rural private schools. If there are already this many different choices, and they have been able to survive, then there is a solid argument for various forms of education choice.^{xv xvi}

The second alternative to the public-school system is the opportunity for a tax credit scholarship. These scholarships are community-funded, and are available through certain non-profit organizations. Essentially, students can apply for these scholarships, and then work with the organization to find a good school fit for them. Those who donate to these organizations are eligible for a tax credit when they file their taxes – with a credit worth up to the full amount of the donation. Currently, it is estimated that more than 225,000 students in 15 states have benefitted from this type of program. In the fall of 2015, Florida had the highest

reported enrollment nationwide, with more than 78,000 students participating.^{xvii}

Tax credits and deductions are a third alternative of school choice. The tax credits and deductions can be applied when parents purchase school supplies, pay for private school, and much more. When the credits are applied, they reduce taxes owed, and a deduction reduces the amount of taxable income. Currently, only four states make use of this system, so there is not sufficient data as to how effective this would be. A program like this, however, could, potentially be very effective in West Virginia – parents who decide to remove their children from the public system and homeschool instead would benefit from this type of program.

A fourth option in education choice is the education savings accounts (ESA). The newest form of school choice, an ESA provides the most flexibility, and is arguably the most promising out of all the school choice options. Education savings accounts are designed for parents who wish to withdraw their children from the public education system in order to take advantage of the flexibility that an ESA offers. Currently, five states (Mississippi, Florida, Arizona, Tennessee, and Nevada) make use of some form of an ESA . Arizona was first to implement the program, while Nevada has the most extensive – as well as the newest -- with 96 percent of students eligible for an ESA. Once the student has been deemed eligible for an ESA, a certain amount of money will be deposited – a portion of the allocated money for that student as determined by the state funding formula – into the account. This money can then be withdrawn and used for homeschooling, private school, private tutoring, and even higher education costs.^{xviii} While some people argue that the ESAs are nothing more than a renamed voucher program, these savings accounts allow parents to truly customize their child's learning. Some of the money could be used for tutoring, while another part could be saved for college or for specialty programs. ESAs allow for more flexibility and cater more specifically to the individual student and his or her immediate and long-term needs, as determined by the child's parent.^{xix}

Opposition to School Choice

Implementing an education choice program in West Virginia has the opportunity to positively transform the quality of our school system. While there are many people who agree that education choice is a

beneficial program that has the ability to transform the school system in West Virginia, many others still have some questions that need to be addressed. The following section of this paper will address some of the most popular challenges to the education choice movement.

Assertion:

Competition Should Not be a Part of Education.

Counter-Point:

One source reported that when competition was implemented in school districts, a significant positive effect on math test scores could be seen.^{xx} Another Utah-based source found that, due to competitive pressure, schools were more likely to incentivize teachers based on progress in the classroom than were schools with less competition in their districts. Further, this same report said that when parents are aware of the competition in the school district, they are more involved in their children's schooling, and are more likely to choose the better school for their child, rather than the one that is closest to their residence. Thus, competition created a more involved parent base, and both short and long-term positive accomplishments.^{xxi} Because of the concept of competition and its parallels to a free market society, the economics are relatively simple. The free market model involving competition aims for the best product (the school) at the lowest cost to consumers (the taxpayers). Any failing product will be forced to improve or will lose market share, because consumers will not choose a sub-par product.

Assertion:

Some Non-Traditional Schools Are Bad

Counter-Point:

Just like any other consumer product, some products and services are better than others. Of course, there will be some bad choice schools, but, due to competitive pressure, they will improve or they will close. If a school

that results in low test scores stays open, then there is most likely something else keeping the children at the school – a specific program, short bus rides, or a safer environment. This is especially important to understand in West Virginia. In a rural state such as West Virginia, special consideration needs to be given. Proximity to schools is important for parents, but parents should not have to choose between good test scores and a short bus ride to school. Competition could play an important role in ensuring that parents would not have to make this type of choice.

Assertion:

School Choice Exacerbates Segregation and Causes “Cream Skimming”

Counter-Point:

There are many sources that show that this argument is simply not true. One study found that there was “little evidence that charter schools are systematically creating greater segregation or cream skimming the best students.”^{xxii} Another study found that many of the concerns associated with ‘cream skimming’ have little merit. The report notes, “disadvantaged students cannot suffer from the “loss” of families who were never in their schools”.^{xxiii} The report also stated that many other studies on ‘cream skimming’ overestimate the impact – showing that there is little to worry about.^{xxiv}

Assertion:

School Choice Cannot Work in a Rural Environment

Counter-Point:

With so much of the media focusing on school choice being implemented in cities and urban areas, it is natural to assume that the same things could not work in a rural environment. Many of these arguments rely on the fact that rural school districts tend to have high transportation costs and low budgets. The National Center for Policy Analysis stated that only 34 percent of rural schools offer advanced placement-type classes to students. If a rural school were to offer online courses to the schools that do not offer AP courses, the number of students with access to advanced education opportunities could increase substantially.^{xxv} So, then the idea that education choice cannot work in a rural area is wrong – a rural area

might just be the place where school choice has the potential to work the best.

This research supports the premise that school choice is beneficial. One analysis reviewed a number of studies to evaluate the value of education choice. Out of 32 studies on public school education, 30 found education choice to have a positive effect on students, while only one study found no visible effect, and one other found that school choice had a negative effect.^{xxvi} The overwhelming evidence shown by these studies can only promote the value of flexibility in education choice.

Conclusion

School choice provides parents and students with something that the current school system is lacking: choice. Children are unique, so it is disappointing how inflexible and standard schooling is in its current form. In a society that thrives and prides itself on its freedom of choice, the school system should follow suit. Enhanced education flexibility in the form of education savings accounts would go a long way to leveling the playing field in order to provide for choice for families who would not otherwise be able to secure a satisfactory education for their children. Lower income families, in particular, could finally provide their children with opportunities they never thought possible if they had the ability to attend a private school, a charter school, or enroll in specialized learning programs.

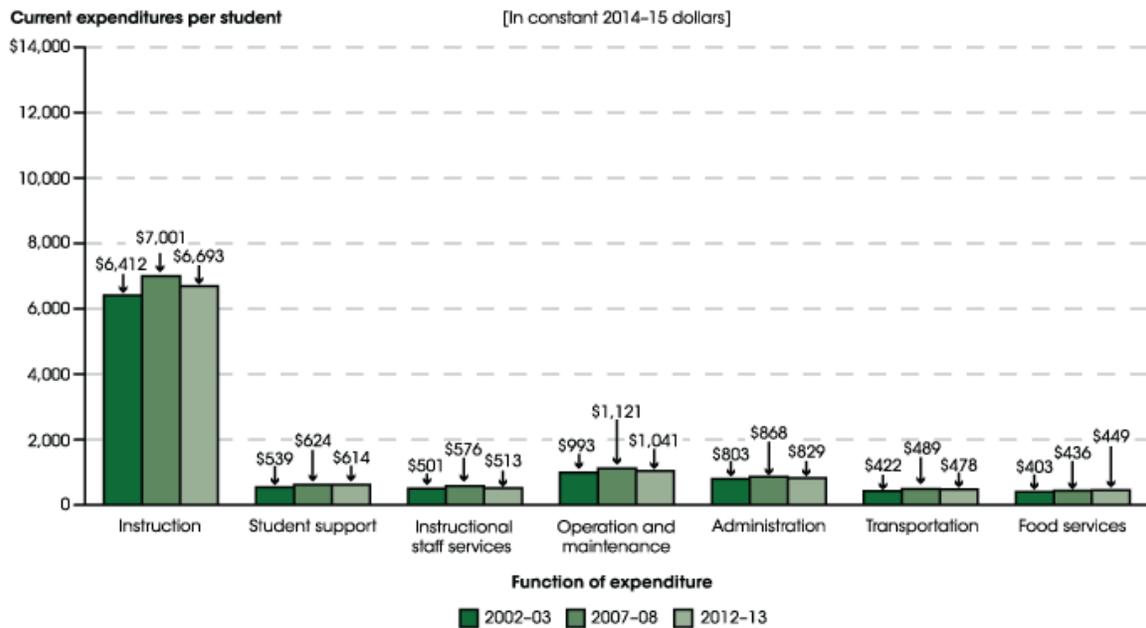
West Virginia could benefit from an education savings account program or the implementation of expanded learning opportunities. Implementing such a program would allow parents to choose thriving schools for their children, could provide new and expanded opportunities, and could even provide funds for homeschooling. With the amount of money that the state currently spends per child on education, West Virginia could achieve positive results. With a program such as the education savings account program or expanded education, children, parents, and educators could pride themselves on the education system they are a part of, instead of being forced to rely on dissatisfactory public schools as their only option.

Key Statistics

This section of the paper will provide key statistics to accompany the facts in this paper, and to provide additional background information.

Education Spending

American Elementary and Secondary Education Spending: National Per-Student, 2002-2013



Source: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66>

American Elementary and Secondary Education Spending: Total (Including Grants and Incentives) (In thousands of dollars)

2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
28,681,510	33,006,176	34,204,076	38,090,184	37,632,308	35,926,140

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
36,213,577	36,630,595	39,636,950	41,896,749	40,672,621	33,759,901

Source: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/history/edhistory.pdf>

West Virginia Elementary and Secondary Education Spending, total:
2002-2013

2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
102,004,533	110,080,229	112,374,750	105,751,391	105,844,362	116,938,363

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
137,996,766	142,192,243	136,770,192	132,236,086	135,417,791	129,495,676

Source: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/history/index.html>

West Virginia Elementary and Secondary School Spending: Per-Student
2006-2013

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
9,351.88	9,610.74	9,852.08	10,367.00	11,527.25	11,846.45

2012	2013
11,445.00	11,132.00

Source: <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/education-data/state-education-spending-per-pupil-data.html>

Test Scores

National SAT Scores: 2002-2013

	Reading	Math	Writing
2002	507	519	N/A
2003	508	518	N/A
2004	508	520	N/A
2005	503	518	497
2006	502	515	494
2007	502	515	494
2008	501	515	493
2009	501	516	492
2010	497	514	489
2011	496	514	488
2012	496	514	488
2013	497	513	487

Source: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=171>

West Virginia SAT Scores: 2002-2013

	Reading	Math	Writing
2002	504	516	N/A
2003	507	519	N/A
2004	508	518	N/A
2005	508	520	497
2006	503	518	493
2007	501	514	493
2008	500	514	492
2009	499	514	491
2010	500	515	489
2011	497	514	488
2012	496	514	488
2013	496	514	487

Source: https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/sat/WV_14_03_03_01.pdf

Rankings

International Education Rankings:
2012,2014

Country A to Z	Overall Index rank and score 2014	Overall Index rank and score 2012
 South Korea	1 Rank 1 1.30	Rank 2 1.23
 Japan	2 Rank 2 1.03	Rank 4 0.89
 Singapore	2 Rank 3 0.99	Rank 5 0.84
 Hong Kong-China	-1 Rank 4 0.96	Rank 3 0.90
 Finland	-4 Rank 5 0.92	Rank 1 1.26

 United Kingdom	0 Rank 6 0.67	Rank 6 0.60
 Canada	3 Rank 7 0.60	Rank 10 0.54
 Netherlands	-1 Rank 8 0.58	Rank 7 0.59
 Ireland	2 Rank 9 0.51	Rank 11 0.53
 Poland	4 Rank 10 0.50	Rank 14 0.43
 Denmark	1 Rank 11 0.46	Rank 12 0.50
 Germany	3 Rank 12 0.41	Rank 15 0.41
 Russia	7 Rank 13 0.40	Rank 20 0.26
 United States	3 Rank 14 0.39	Rank 17 0.35
 Australia	-2 Rank 15 0.38	Rank 13 0.46
 New Zealand	-8 Rank 16 0.35	Rank 8 0.56
 Israel	12 Rank 17 0.30	Rank 29 -0.15
 Belgium	-2 Rank 18 0.28	Rank 16 0.35
 Czech Republic	3 Rank 19 0.27	Rank 22 0.20
 Switzerland	-11 Rank 20 0.25	Rank 9 0.55
 Norway	5 Rank 21 0.21	Rank 26 0.11
 Hungary	-4 Rank 22 0.17	Rank 18 0.33
 France	2 Rank 23 0.17	Rank 25 0.13
 Sweden	-3 Rank 24 0.17	Rank 21 0.24
 Italy	-1 Rank 25 0.11	Rank 24 0.14

	Austria	-3 Rank 26 0.10	Rank 23 0.15
	Slovakia	-8 Rank 27 0.09	Rank 19 0.32
	Portugal	-1 Rank 28 0.04	Rank 27 0.01
	Spain	-1 Rank 29 -0.08	Rank 28 -0.08
	Bulgaria	0 Rank 30 -0.26	Rank 30 -0.23
	Romania	1 Rank 31 -0.44	Rank 32 -0.60
	Chile	1 Rank 32 -0.79	Rank 33 -0.66
	Greece	-2 Rank 33 -0.86	Rank 31 -0.31
	Turkey	0 Rank 34 -0.94	Rank 34 -1.24
	Thailand	2 Rank 35 -1.16	Rank 37 -1.46
	Colombia	0 Rank 36 -1.25	Rank 36 -1.46
	Argentina	-2 Rank 37 -1.49	Rank 35 -1.41
	Brazil	1 Rank 38 -1.73	Rank 39 -1.65
	Mexico	-1 Rank 39 -1.76	Rank 38 -1.60
	Indonesia	0 Rank 40 -1.84	Rank 40 -2.03

Source: <http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com/index/index-comparison>

Endnotes

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