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# From Chains to Change: The Freedom to Choose in Education

*Matthew Beal*

In 1962, an economist named Milton Friedman published a book called *Capitalism and Freedom* in which he elaborated on how economic capitalism should work in a society increasingly controlled by government bureaucracy. Friedman proposed several ideas on how to cut back on government meddling in the lives of individuals and return the freedom and power to choose back to individuals. Upon reaching chapter six, Friedman (1962) talked about the role of government in education. Although his proposal was not technically new, it was an idea that had received scant discussion for several years. Friedman had proposed the modern concept of free choice in education. Several years later, his ideas are now heated points of debate in the realm of education.

Two things should be noted here before a discussion on free choice in education can be had, the first of which is the fundamental question: What is meant by “free choice”? The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (FFEC) identifies four ways that this concept is implemented in the modern sense. Classically, the basic school voucher (Method #1) is a portion of public funding given to students and their parents that is to be used to send students to private schools (FFEC, 2016). Currently, the classic voucher is the most popular method followed closely by tax credit scholarships (Method #2) given to taxpayers who donate to nonprofits offering private school scholarships (FFEC, 2016). More recently, however, two more methods have gained traction. An Educational Savings Account (ESA) (Method #3) receives funding in the same manner as a voucher, but the funds can be used for substantially more than just school choice. Funds from an ESA can be used on private schooling, tutoring, entry-level college courses, textbooks, online programs, educational therapy, and other education resources (FFEC, 2016). Finally, there are individual tax credits and deductions (Method #4). Tax credits lower the tax burden, tax deductions reduce the

taxable income, and both provide monetary relief for the purpose of funding education. Together, these four methods comprise the modern free choice based education system (“Fast Facts on School Choice”, 2016).

The second notable point to be made when discussing free choice is that it is a fiercely polarizing topic. This great divide is merely aggravated by the fact that the split opinions typically fall within the opposing ideologies of modern liberalism and modern conservatism. On the liberal side are organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the American Society for the Separation of Church and State (ASSCS), all of whom contend that free choice is a grave mistake and should be avoided. Chuck Schumer, a US senator from New York encapsulates this position with his statement, “I’m totally opposed to vouchers. I will fight them tooth and nail” (“Chuck Schumer Quotes at BrainyQuote.com”, 2016). Meanwhile, conservative groups such as the FFEC, the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA), and the American Civil Rights Institute (ACRI) promote free choice in any of its various incarnations. One of the foremost proponents of free choice was Milton Friedman, given his aforementioned reintroduction of the idea and his founding of the FFEC. Given these two sides, the logical question becomes: Who’s right?

I will not attempt to hide the fact that (a) I am a fiscal and social conservative, (b) I consider Milton Friedman to be one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century, and (c) I believe we should implement a free choice based education system. To do so would serve me no purpose. However, no set of ideas is above the scrutinizing eye of a rational and logical discussion, and a free choice based education system has a few points on which to be contested, specifically in regard to its fiscal and academic improvements. I aim to sufficiently answer those contested points and justify the validity, efficacy, and necessity of a free choice based education system. Ultimately, I believe that, based upon careful examination of the facts and proper application of logic, free choice in education should be permitted and funded in the United States because it is a financially viable option that promotes both higher literacy rates among school-age persons and a higher standard of education among schools.

## The Fiscal Impact of Free Choice Education

Essentially, the fiscal argument against free choice boils down to two points of contention: finances and fraud. The first main point that opponents of free choice have is that it, at a minimum, will have no financial benefits and, at worst, will create an even greater educational disparity between high and low income families. The AFT presents a few pieces of evidence where the implementation of voucher systems had led to serious problems. In Milwaukee, 42% of voucher schools offered no viable method for special needs children (AFT, 2006). Washington D.C. found that only three private schools were able to be attended with the funds provided by the voucher system, and the Department of Education found that 70-85% of schools were unwilling to become voucher schools if they were required to accept special needs children into their enrollment (AFT, 2006). Distress over the financial impact, however, does not end just with the individual but extends to the state as well. According to the AFT (2006), costs for voucher schools were almost \$1000 higher than public schools in Milwaukee, and Florida public schools were considered to be nearly \$1600 cheaper than voucher schools. By contrast, the AFT (2006) claims that diverting these resources into the public school system would be substantially more effective. An example offered by them pertains to funneling the resources from corporate vouchers into a public school reading program. By doing this, the AFT (2006) says that a \$3500 voucher normally offered to one student could be used to fund about nine public school students for merely \$400 per pupil.

The second point of contention offered over the fiscal aspect of free choice education is that of fraud. The AFT (2006) along with other liberal groups are concerned that a free choice system, “can be fertile breeding ground for ‘fly-by-night’ schools run by uncredentialed entrepreneurs” (pg. 2). Three stories are presented the AFT (2006) of how voucher money has been misused. In one instance, \$350,000 of corporate voucher money was given to an Islamic University that had connections to the terrorist organization Islamic Jihad (AFT, 2006). Another story found that, for several years, Wisconsin was unable to shut down a Milwaukee voucher school that was headed by a convicted felon and run by staff members who used illicit drugs on school property (AFT, 2006). A final story told of \$168,000 that was

given to a Florida voucher school that was also run by a convicted felon and may have never used the money for actual school purposes (AFT, 2006). The AFT seems to raise some valid concerns over free choice in education.

To first address the issue of fraud, I will admit that it is a travesty to have stories of fraud and abuse come from voucher schools. But then again, it's a travesty to have fraud and abuse in any educational facility, and I believe that free choice best stifles the likelihood that fraud will exist. Milton Friedman (1975) provided the basis for this line of logic:

How can one assure that the voucher is spent for schooling not diverted to other family expenses? The answer is that the voucher would have to be spent in an approved school or teaching establishment. True, this does mean some government regulation of the schools, but of course private schools are regulated to an extent now, to assure that attendance at them satisfies compulsory schooling requirements. Compared to current regulation of public schools, the government requirements in a voucher plan would be a mere trifle. (Point #3)

Friedman's remarks are not only a commendation of free choice but also an indictment against the governmental control of schools. The AFT, in its reporting, makes a logical slip by assuming that public schools do not suffer from mishaps related to fraud. In his book *Hostile Takeover*, Matt Kibbe outlines some issues of fraud and abuse that exist in the public school system, many of which are connected to teacher tenure. The issue is not necessarily that teachers are tenured, but rather that this tenure, coupled with government bureaucracy, makes the removal of poor teachers nearly impossible. In New Jersey, four years time and \$283,000 were spent trying to fire a public school teacher who physically abused students (Kibbe, 2012). A New York City public school teacher who sent sexually explicit emails to a sixteen-year-old student was fired only after a six year wait was completed and \$350,000 was paid to him (Kibbe, 2012). In total, New York City taxpayers spend nearly \$20 million per year trying to fire poor teachers from the public school system while they sit in "rubber rooms" and collect full salary for not teaching (Kibbe, 2012). I could wax eloquent about this point, but the fact is that fraud and abuse are part of any system, even those in education.

Turning now to the issue of finances in the voucher system, I believe the AFT is simply wrong on their claim that free choice is not cost-effective. Any system that is poorly implemented, as has been the case with their highlighted examples, runs the risk of being a financial woe. When free choice is properly implemented, however, the results are fiscally beneficial to both the individual and the state. A work done by Dr. John Merrifield and Dr. Michael R. Ford (2015) showed that adjustments as simple as eliminating waste and expanding participation in the Milwaukee voucher system has led to over 4 billion dollars in state savings and \$200 more in per pupil funding. Additionally, even when vouchers don't cover the full cost of tuition, people still tend to sign up for them. In Washington D.C., during 1997, vouchers only covered \$1700 of a \$4000 private school tuition (Cordell, 1998). Regardless of this, even low-income families took advantage of the opportunity to remove their children from failing schools in order to send them to more than 70 different schools that offered better education (Cordell, 1998). Milton Friedman (1975) showed that free choice was economically viable for three reasons. First, funding for public schools only benefits those parents who send their children there, but parents who send their children to private schools are essentially paying twice for education via taxes for public schools and tuition for private schools. Changing this method of payment to a free choice-based system eliminates this inequality. Second, opening the schools up to the free market would drive down the cost of tuition since there is no longer a need to compete against the government (an objective that has a historically poor win-loss ratio). Finally, as shown earlier, many parents are willing to accept a temporarily higher cost of education for the purpose of securing a better education for their children (Friedman, 1975). The facts show that free choice in education is financially viable and offers a better way of controlling fraud.

## **The Academic Impact of Free Choice Education**

The NEA and AFT have made it very clear that they do not support vouchers not only for financial reasons but also for academic reasons. They postulate that either free choice fails to increase the academic successes of students, or it ends up actually hurting the academic results of students. The NEA cites a study done by the

United States General Accounting Office (2001) that shows only minimal improvements in reading and writing scores between voucher schools and public schools. Haggai Kupermintz (2002) argues in his work that external variables not related to the voucher system produced the gains shown in the Florida system around the time when vouchers were implemented. The AFT (2006) states that a 2001 study done by Jay P. Greene on Florida's A-Plus voucher program was discounted by Gregory Camilli and Katrina Bulkley in another 2001 study, and that his findings on the effectiveness of vouchers on education were invalid.

The evidence presented by the opposition is not necessarily wrong, but I do believe that it is premature. A more recent study by Greg Forster and Christian D'Andrea (2009) took a second look at Florida's version of free choice education (via tax credit scholarships). The results, collected by a random assignment telephone survey with a 3.5 % margin of error, were an overwhelming endorsement of the program. In the areas of individual attention, academic progress, teacher quality, school responsiveness, and student behavior; roughly 95-97% of respondents were at least "satisfied" with the scholarship program, with an average of 75% being "very satisfied" (Forster & Andrea, 2009). Comparatively, only an average of 43% had been at least "satisfied" with the public school equivalents, with an average of a mere 4.4% being "very satisfied" (Forster & Andrea, 2009). The results appear even more impressive when it is considered that most of the respondents are low-income, minority individuals (Forster & Andrea, 2009). It should come as no surprise that 100% of the respondents in the Florida study favored a renewal of the scholarship program (Forster & Andrea). In other states, academic improvements are also being found. Matt Kibbe (2012) shows in his work that district scores for standardized tests in Louisiana have risen by 24 percent since 2005, around the time when free choice began to make headway there. Interestingly, a large part of Louisiana's program was simply the decision to let parents choose which public schools they wanted to send their children to instead of having it be assigned to them by district boundaries. Simply allowing individual choice to flourish sparked a growth of literacy. In Washington D.C., Jason Richwine (2010) conducted a study of the congressional voucher program using a lottery system to determine his respondents (a technique often

referred to as the gold standard in controlling for external variables such as race, economic status, and parental education). His study found that 91% of voucher students graduated high school compared to 70% of non-voucher schools (Richwine, 2010). Not only were graduation rates higher in voucher schools, but students in these institutions averaged a nineteen month reading advantage compared to their public school peers (Richwine, 2010).

It should be noted that most of the research against free choice often comes very close to its inception, and research in favor of it often comes after it has existed for several years. This is hardly a surprising conclusion; any new system will take time to start showing results, and it's foolish to declare it inefficient before it has a chance to lift itself off the ground. Over time, though, it appears that the freedom to choose grants the ability to flourish.

## Concluding Remarks

Free choice in education should be permitted and funded in the United States because it is a financially viable option that promotes both higher literacy rates among school-age persons and a higher standard of education among schools. Statistically, the gains of free choice education can be seen fairly easily. Likewise, it's just as easy to see the benefits from a philosophical perspective. Opening up schools to choices of individuals brings competition, and competition is what advances and betters the state of any institution. Competition gets a bad reputation from those who portray it as a vicious entity where the biggest and meanest institutions end up winning, but that's not its objective. When schools are allowed to compete it puts the students back at the center of attention. Currently, the schools cater to the government for better districting and funding; the consumers, students and parents, are left out of the picture much of the time. But with free choice given back to parents and students, schools now shift their focus back to the consumers. What happens as a result? Schools seek to attract new students through lower tuition costs, quality facilities, and academically excellent programs. No government intervention and meddling is needed to force these to happen because the freedom to choose inspires this naturally. Moreover, there is an ingrained system of checks against poor quality in free choice education. Parents and students are the ones who daily interact with their schools, and they



will be able to recognize a failing one faster than any government institution can. Underperforming and corrupt schools will find it difficult to survive when the power of choice is returned to parents and students. Adam Smith (1776), the Scottish philosopher and author of *The Wealth of Nations*, eloquently said it best:

Were there no public institutions for education, no system, no science would be taught for which there was not some demand, or which the circumstances of the times did not render it either necessary, or convenient, or at least fashionable, to learn. A private teacher could never find his account in teaching either an exploded and antiquated system of a science acknowledged to be useful, or a science universally believed to be a mere useless and pedantic heap of sophistry and nonsense. Such systems, such sciences, can subsist nowhere, but in those incorporated societies for education whose prosperity and revenue are in a great measure independent of their reputation and altogether independent of their industry. Were there no public institutions for education, a gentleman, after going through with application and abilities the most complete course of education which the circumstances of the times were supposed to afford, could not come into the world completely ignorant of everything which is the common subject of conversation among gentlemen and men of the world. (p. 602)

Smith's point comes down to to one phrase: Free to choose. Free the education system and let the public decide what public education should really be. Nothing about free choice says that students have to go to a certain school or use a particular service, and that's the whole point. Parents and students are free to make wise, informed decisions based on their individual circumstances to fit respective educational needs. The main force blocking this liberation is the existence of organizations like the ATF and the NEA.. Albert Shanker, a former president of the ATF said, "When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of schoolchildren" (Kibbe, 2012). Former top officials of the NEA have said, "The NEA has been the single biggest obstacle to education reform in this country. We know because we worked

for the NEA” (Kibbe, 2012). It is reprehensible that this is the reality our schools have to face right now, but it doesn’t have to remain this way. Freeing up the educational system leads to the amelioration of literacy rates, the enrichment of resources, and the advancement of student excellence. As Matt Kibbe (2012) puts it, “... freedom works” (p.333).

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