

The Sun Archives

Archive Info: Opinion - Feb 13, 2016

Celebrate school choice!

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Guest columnist

School choice frequently carries a negative connotation. The mere mention of school choice often connotes the idea of students leaving traditional public schools and using taxpayer money to enroll in charter or private schools.

This common misconception is in all likelihood kept some from celebrating National School Choice Week that took place in January.

But it should not be this way. Everybody should celebrate school choice all the time. After all, true school choice is not unidirectional. Traditional public schools are one of the many options that students and their families have to choose from. If charter or private schools are not performing well, students have the choice to attend traditional public schools that are performing better.

It is this very freedom to choose that will lead teachers and administrators in all forms of education to be innovative in the way they educate Arkansas' children. Because money follows the student, schools are forced to compete for student enrollment. This competition, in turn, causes schools of all types to be more responsive to the educational needs of the children.

The beauty of school choice is that students are not restricted to schools that are not performing well. Students from schools that are performing poorly have the opportunity to transfer to schools that are performing better. The fear of losing students should be an incentive for all schools to provide a better education in order to retain their students or, better yet, attract more students.

The Arkansas Legislature should be applauded for allowing public school choice in the state. Through the Public School Choice ACT of 2013, students in Arkansas can transfer from one school to another, both within and outside the district of residence. Such a choice allows for parents to decide what public school best fits the educational needs of their children. Even though there is currently a cap on the number of transfers a school can accept, it is a good opportunity for public schools to compete among themselves to provide a quality education.

For example, consider Jonesboro. Jonesboro has five high schools that are serving students in grades 9-12. Four of those schools are traditional public schools while one of them is a charter school. In addition, Jonesboro is home to a Christian private school that ninth- through 12-graders are able to attend. Furthermore, students in Jonesboro are also able to enroll in a statewide online charter school called the Arkansas Virtual Academy.

It is encouraging to observe that Jonesboro residents are taking advantage of the opportunity afforded to them by the Public School Choice Act of 2013. According to data obtained from the Arkansas Department of Education, during the 2015-16 school year, about 4 percent of high school students in Jonesboro are choosing to attend a public school located outside their residential area.

School choice also has positive spillover effects. Studies show that choice can be the engine for getting parents involved in their child's education. Parents tend to be more involved in school activities and their children's homework when they are able to choose what school they send their children to. This is significant because research shows that parental involvement is an important determinant of educational success.

As we celebrate school choice, let us celebrate the opportunity that the Public School Choice ACT of 2013 grants Arkansas' children. At the same time, let us be reminded that those choices can be expanded to allow for more charter and private school options.

Having school choice allows students to enroll in schools that better match their educational needs, which leads to better educational outcomes for Arkansas' kids. Arkansas' children deserve it.

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