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The Power of Choice - Good News About Higher Education

In recent years the term “choice” has received some bad press specifically because of its use in abortion politics. We forget, at our peril, that individual choice is the *summa qua non* of our liberties—we choose who governs and who doesn’t; we choose what we do in our careers; we choose how much we want to work and how much we don’t. Many people around the world have lacked these choices in the twentieth-century, particularly in nations controlled by communism.

Yet there are some areas of the economy where choice doesn’t truly apply and unfortunately it is in the two largest areas of government spending (health care and elementary and secondary education) where choice does not exist as it should and where individual freedom is limited. In those two areas of our economy the lack of a true market for services hurts the delivery of goods at a lower cost and superior service.

One area where school choice does exist is in higher education. It is the time of year when high school seniors are beginning to get anxious. They have taken their college aptitude tests and have made their applications to colleges and universities and now they wait. They wait to hear about admission to college; most have selected more than one school to apply to; some have selected elite colleges while others may be simply attending the local college near their home. They wait to see if they received scholarships and financial aid. It can be an excruciating process for them but an exhilarating one as well.

What is ultimately so important about their decision is that the students and their parents have choice. They can apply to elite colleges where admissions are selective and tuition is high; they can apply to state universities; they can apply to religious schools; they can apply to the local community college. In each case parents fill out a financial aid form to see if they qualify for guaranteed federal student loans, Pell Grants or other assistance.

Higher education in America as a result is a success story. Students from around the world clamor to come to America for college. More than forty percent of all high school graduates go to college. While its costs have increased over the past twenty years, college education is accessible for all provided one works hard and pursues the opportunities available to them in terms of loans, financial aid, grants or work study.

Students and parents can choose to go to any number of educational institutions. If colleges don’t provide the services, educational opportunities and academic standards sought after by consumers, they don’t do very well financially and in terms of enrollment. *The Weekly Standard* last month focused on the story of Antioch College in Ohio, a place where radical activism and political correctness applies more than anything else—a result of this is that student enrollment has plummeted to 300 students and the college (more than a century old) may be forced to close.

The recent developments in online for-profit educational institutions like the University of Phoenix and Cappella University attest to the growing demand to fit academic services to the busy lifestyles of working professionals. It is a market response designed to fill the void of education for those seeking professional degrees and programs but without the time to commit to a fifteen week traditional college semester, attending class on campus and committing three hours a week to doing so.

Choice reigns in higher education because a competitive market exists there. Why can't the same marketplace exist in elementary and secondary education?

The two largest portions of state budgets are education and health care. This is true in Kansas and in every other state. The more spent on both of these sectors the lower the quality of care and the lower the results on standardized testing and other measurements of educational effectiveness.

If a student lives in a poor economic area the student's parents are bound by law to send them to schools which may be failing on any number of state assessments and standards. The problem isn't lack of money. Washington, D.C. has one of the worst school districts in the country; test scores are low, drop-out rates are high yet per pupil spending is among the highest in the nation (over \$14,000 per student). You can't blame the failure of D.C.'s educational system on a lack of resources. But you may be able to blame the continued failure in that system to a lack of choice.

Children are forced to go to failing schools because of laws which prevent choice of schools by parents. If your local school isn't doing the job and you lack the money to send your child to a private school, why can't you choose to send them to another public school which is doing the job of educating children? It works for higher education and it can work for elementary and secondary education as well.

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